



THE BUFFALO BILL STORIES

The Only Publication authorized by the Hon. W.F. Cody ("BUFFALO BILL")

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 18.

Price, Five Cents.

BUFFALO BILL AT GRAVE YARD GAP

OR
THE DOOMED DRIVERS OF THE OVERLAND



BY THE AUTHOR OF
"BUFFALO BILL"

"SO THIS IS A WARNING FROM THE GRAVE, IS IT? WELL, I REFUSE TO HEED IT," SAID BUFFALO BILL.

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NEW YORK, September 14, 1901.

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By the author of "BUFFALO BILL."

CHAPTER I.

DOOMED TO DEATH.

It was when that dashing and able officer, Nelson A. Miles, was commanding a frontier post, after the close of the Civil War, that a doom went forth against the brave drivers of the Overland stages.

Colonel Miles, for such was his rank as a regular army officer at that time, had a rather desperate field of service, with the Indians on the warpath constantly, a lot of men in the settlement and mining camps to control and a lawless element to keep in check, who lived by the murder and robbery of those whom fortune had favored.

These last named were merciless to all from whom they could get gold, the successful miner being their marked prey, though army paymasters, officers, travelers and even women suffered at their hands.

With a comparatively small force of soldiers under his

command, Colonel Miles was expected not only to hold the Indians in check, but to make war upon them, also to guard the trail and keep order among the camps.

Of course, with outlaws most numerous, and their identity unknown, the task was a most hazardous and difficult one, indeed; but the gallant commander of Fort Rest did all in his power to maintain order, keep the Indians back and protect the stage trails.

The main trail was the one most cursed by the outlaw bands, and, as the drivers had lately been daring to rush their coaches through, braving all chances of being killed, war had been waged, a cruel, merciless war upon these brave men, until, as a number had been killed, it was found difficult to find any man who would dare death by taking a coach on the run, or who would try to do so.

The result was that the stage company had offered a large bonus to each driver who would drive the trail, and yet this did not tempt men to risk almost certain death.

With every confidence in his chief of scouts to accomplish all that he set out to do, Colonel Miles sent for him and the two had a long talk together.

The chief of scouts was William F. Cody, the hero of world-wide fame, better known under the title of Buffalo Bill.

It was his deeds of desperate heroism in those early days of Wild West warfare that gained for Buffalo Bill his enviable title and the claim to be justly known as the King of Bordermen.

A description of the noted scout here would be useless for to the reader of to-day, so well is he known, so widely told have been his deeds of heroism.

Fort Rest was a stockade fort, built by the advancing soldiers who had halted there as a resting-place at first, and later because it was an ideal spot for a military post.

It was well located for defense, and held a position from which offensive operations could readily be made.

Fifty miles to the east was Trail End City, the place where the Overland trails had centered and had a terminus, but to the west it had been found necessary to place another outpost sixty miles away from Fort Rest, as an advance guard.

Winter had caught the advance post without sufficient provisions, and unable to get supplies a number of men had starved to death, gaining for it the name of Fort Famine.

The two posts had been thoroughly fortified in the spring, the one known as Fort Famine, the other as Fort Rest, the latter being the headquarters of the military district over which Colonel Miles had command.

On the stage trail between Fort Rest and Fort Famine was Graveyard Gap, or Canyon.

It was just here that death stalked with merciless hand, and on account of its location that so well favored them the road agents had chosen it as the very place to strike at the coaches that were compelled to go through the gap.

Graveyard Gap had justly won its name, for a battle between Indians, the Sioux and Pawnees, had been fought there and strewed the canyon with human bones.

Then a fight between United States cavalry and redskins had been fought in the canyon several years after,

and the result was that many new graves dotted the scene.

The relief going to the aid of Fort Famine with supplies had been attacked there by redskins and massacred.

This made Graveyard Gap still more a place to dread.

As there was a rich mining country beyond Fort Famine, the Overland Stage Company had found it expedient to run a coach through each week, and back all the way to Trail End City.

But the horrors of Graveyard Gap were added to, as there was a stageload of passengers, with the driver, slain and robbed there.

Deaths in the coaches, and of the drivers followed frequently, until the gap became known as the Death Drive.

Both Indians and road agents were said to be the murderers and robbers, but about this opinions differed.

There was talk of establishing a picket there, but no water or grass could be found within ten miles upon either side, and nothing but a very large force would have dared remain, as the redskins could sweep down from the mountains in numbers and annihilate them.

When at last Buffalo Bill was called by General Miles into consultation, and asked to take as a special duty the work of securing drivers for the coaches, and endeavoring to find some way, with the limited means at hand for protecting them, the great scout entered upon the deadly duty with his usual vigor and fearlessness.

Buffalo Bill's first work had been to find three new drivers willing to take the deadly risk of the run through Graveyard Gap with the threat hanging over them that sure death would be visited upon them.

Buffalo Bill went at once to headquarters to report to Colonel Miles.

That gallant officer received him cordially and quickly asked:

"Back so soon, Cody?"

"Yes, colonel, I was not detained long."

"Well, what luck?"

"The coach goes through to-morrow, sir."

"Good!"

"And who is the brave fellow, Cody, who takes the terrible chances?" asked Colonel Miles.

"Charlie Christopher, sir, and a good man," answered the scout.

"I wish I could give him an escort, but I dare not, for

we cannot afford to lose any of our soldiers now; but I fear he will be killed!"

"I feel almost certain of it, sir; but he is a driver, and duty calls him to sacrifice himself."

"True; but if he falls no other man will dare go."

"Yes, sir, Ben Bolton has volunteered to take the coach if Charlie falls."

"He, too, has nerve, and it will be a pity to see him go under, and if he does, then that ends trying to keep the Overland coaches running until my force is stronger."

"No, sir, for Harry Hawkshaw will go if Ben Bolton goes under."

"Ah! He, too, is a plucky one."

"He is the man, is he not, who so well imitates a bugle call?"

"Yes, sir."

"You surely got no others to volunteer?"

"Not another man would do so, sir."

"Then, if those three men fail, I shall order Peters to stop the attempt to run the coaches."

"There is one more chance, sir."

"Indeed!"

"Who is he?"

"That, sir, I cannot tell you, but if those three men fail, I have a man who will take the coach through."

"If he falls, also, then it will be time to stop the coaches."

"I should think so; but I am interested in knowing who this plucky fellow can be, Cody."

"You shall know in good time, colonel, so pardon me for refusing to tell you now."

"Certainly, Cody, and if he is your choice, I have faith in him," was the colonel's reply.

"As we have gone into this game, Colonel Miles, to win the game against the outlaws, we must do it, cost what it may in the lives of brave men," said Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, if we can find the men to risk certain death."

"They will be found, sir, in spite of the doom of death upon all drivers now who dare to take the trail," said Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER II.

CHRISTOPHER'S COACH ON THE TRAIL.

There were three coaches to go through on the branch trails of the Overland.

Their destinations were Trail End City, Fort Famine and Fort Rest.

At the former place was what its proprietor, Peters, was pleased to call a "first-class hotel," though there were many who differed with him as to his claim.

The coach from the north came in at midnight, and the one from the southward at dawn.

At sunrise the coach going west was to start, the one to Fort Rest, through Graveyard Gap, and thence on to Fort Famine, and Charlie Christopher was to take it out.

There were at Trail End City three passengers waiting to go on to the mines beyond, and in the vicinity of Fort Famine, and upon the three coaches coming in were five other passengers.

Two of these were for Fort Rest, the other three for Fort Famine, and one of the latter was a young girl of sixteen, the daughter of an officer at the fort, another being the wife of a sergeant, the third a soldier, a young man and a new recruit.

So Charlie Christopher had eight passengers to go through with him; and the young girl had spoken for the box seat.

Every eye was upon Christopher, as he came out of Peters' Hotel after breakfast and lighted his cigar.

His face was a trifle pale, and yet his look was one in which there was not an atom of fear.

The young girl, a perfect beauty, and bright as a lark, must also have known of the full danger of the road, yet did not show that she held any dread of it.

There were others of the passengers who looked uneasy, however, and the two whose journey was to end at Fort Rest had a satisfied expression upon their faces.

Every eye was upon Charlie, and the drivers, his "pards of the reins," came forward and grasped his hand as though in a last farewell.

Then he mounted to his box, there was a roaring cheer for his pluck, for all of Trail End City had gathered there to see him take his departure, and Peters gave the word:

"Time's up, Charlie, and Heaven protect you."

"Go!"

A crack of the whip and the team of six horses bounded away on their run to Fort Rest.

Fifteen miles out there was a relay and fresh horses were hitched in place of the others, and twenty miles farther another team was put in.

Then it was about a fifteen-mile run to Fort Rest.

Charlie had made good time, and been greatly entertained by the conversation of his fair companion, and including his two halts at the relay corrals, had made the run in eight hours, coming in sight of the fort just at two o'clock.

"See here, miss, I wants you to do me a favor," he said to the young girl.

"Certainly, what is it, sir?" was the ready answer.

"I wants you to stop over at Fort Rest until this trail is safe ter travel, and ter keep ther sergeant's wife with yer."

"Not I."

"Yer see, miss, I knows yer is game, but then there is something awful mysterious about ther killing at Graveyard Gap, and there is women in ther graves there as well as men.

"I hain't hurt ter see men face death, but when it comes to a woman, and especially a pretty gal like you, I draws out o' ther game, so I asks yer ter stay at ther fort, and keep ther sergeant's wife with yer."

"I started to rejoin my father, knowing the dangers I had to face, and I shall go on my way with you," was the determined reply of the maiden.

"I'm sorry, miss; but I hopes the colonel won't let yer go."

"My father may be under Colonel Miles' orders, but I am not, and I go through.

"What time will we reach Fort Famine?"

"We are due there at midnight, miss," was the significant reply.

"Well, my ticket reads to Fort Famine, and I go on with the coach."

Charlie sighed but said no more, and soon after blew the bugle call to announce the coming of the coach.

"Now let me have your bugle," said the maiden, and she at once began to ring off a most stirring air, to the great delight of Charlie.

As the bugle notes died away the coach dashed up to the station in the fort, and the driver was greeted with

a cheer, for all knew the chances the brave fellow had taken to go through to Fort Famine.

The horses were quickly replaced by fresh ones, time was allowed for the passengers to get dinner, and, minute the two who were to remain at the fort, the coach rolled on its way.

The coach had been gone an hour or more when Colonel Miles came out of his quarters, attended by a group of officers, and in the midst of whom was Buffalo Bill. For a war council had been held, which the chief of scouts had been asked to attend.

"The coach has not come through yet, Cody, so your man must have backed down at the last minute," said the colonel.

Before Buffalo Bill could reply, an orderly approached with the mail bag and handed it to the adjutant.

"What, orderly, has the coach arrived?" cried the colonel, for the stage station was at the other end of the fort, nearly half a mile from headquarters.

"Yes, sir, over an hour ago, but I did not wish to disturb you, sir."

"Indeed! Then I retract the remark against Christopher, Cody."

"Who was the driver, orderly?" quickly asked Buffalo Bill.

"Charlie Christopher, sir, and he was as chipper as could be."

"Orderly, I expected the daughter of Major Dean on that coach on her way to join her father at Fort Famine.

"Was she along?"

"Yes, sir, and she went on with Charlie and his other five passengers, sir."

Colonel Miles turned pale at hearing this, while he said:

"Great heavens! her father asked me to stop her here. The coach must have been ahead of time, orderly."

"Half an hour, sir, and did not stop long, for the driver wanted to get through Graveyard Gap before night."

"Quick, Captain May, take a squad of your men and ride with all haste after the coach, carrying a led horse along for Miss Dean to return on, for you must fetch her back with you. Tell her that such are my orders and you, Cody, go as guide for the captain."

"Yes, sir, but suppose she will not come, for she is a woman."

"But she must."

"But still, Colonel Miles, I cannot force her to do so," Captain May remarked.

"Then, if she refuses all your powers of persuasion, command her, and if she still remains obdurate, then escort the coach through to Fort Famine, for I must delay our intended move until your return, that is all," was the answer.

Buffalo Bill had already hastened away, and the captain went quickly to his quarters.

But it was a quarter of an hour before sixteen gallant troopers, under a sergeant, reported at his quarters ready for the ride.

Buffalo Bill, with two of his scouts, awaited them at the stockade gate, and when all was ready the party started off on the trail of the coach just one hour and forty minutes after its departure.

"A stern chase is a long one, Cody, and the coach is all of twelve miles away, if not more, so set the pace," said Captain May.

With these instructions, Buffalo Bill set a rattling pace, which he soon saw was too fast for the heavier horses of the troopers, so he slackened it somewhat after several miles had been gone over.

"The Graveyard Gap is a trifle nearer Fort Rest, sir, than Fort Famine, just about twenty-eight miles away, and I fear we will hardly reach there before the coach enters it. Charlie never spares his horses, and takes no note of schedule time, for he pushes right through," said Cody, when a halt was made, ten miles out, at a brook.

"Well, Cody, what have you to suggest?" asked Captain May, who saw that the chief of scouts had something more to say.

"That you allow me and my two men to push on ahead, sir, with all the speed we can."

"You may do so, and I will accompany you, leaving the sergeant to bring up the men," was the reply.

So the captain and the three scouts set off at a more rapid pace than the troopers could keep up, Buffalo Bill urging his horse to a sweeping gallop.

The trail of the horses and coach showed that Charlie had been driving along at considerable speed, having

passed the relay corral twenty miles out from the fort two and a half hours after leaving it.

"He were going fer all ther critters was worth, Bill, and shot off with ther fresh team in ther same style, so he'll git through ther gap afore dark, if ther cattle kin hold out," said the stock tender at the relay station.

"We must catch him if we kill our horses, captain," was Buffalo Bill's response, as the party took to the trail again.

CHAPTER III.

TRAILING A MYSTERY.

On sped the scouts and Captain May, after leaving Relay Number Three, as it was known, and discussing, as they rode along, what the stock tender had told them.

"Charlie is a plucky fellow, Cody, and so are his passengers, for all must know what they may expect," said Captain May.

"Yes, sir, it requires nerve, and I sincerely hope we can reach the gap before the coach enters it, for it would be fearful if Miss Dean was killed."

"It would be, indeed," and Captain May urged the party on more rapidly.

They had left the last stream they would cross for miles, and were descending a valley road to the gap, which was a rocky pass through a mountain range, and over a mile in length.

But, ride as they might they saw that it was impossible to reach there before sunset at least; but this meant that Christopher, who must still be half-a-dozen miles ahead, would have gone through by daylight, and that, at least, was cheering to contemplate, for ahead of time an hour or more, he might thus elude any enemy who was going there to ambush him, for certainly such murderous foes would not remain longer in the spot than was necessary for their red work.

At the pace they had ridden, Cody felt that they would arrive at the canyon nearly half an hour ahead of the troopers, and time might prove most important to Charlie and his passengers.

So down the valley trail they went at a gallop, increasing their pace as they reached the level road, and still more as they drew near the towering rocks which marked the entrance to the Death Gap.

The shadows had already thrown the valley in gloom,

and as they neared the pass, they beheld only darkness ahead of them, where the light of day was shut out by the towering walls of rock.

Into the canyon they dashed, leaving the light behind them, for all was gloom there, which would increase as the night settled down, for the mountain tops far away were yet tinged with the setting sun.

But Buffalo Bill knew his trail well, and went on at a pace scarcely less rapid than in the valley.

In the center of the canyon, that is half-way through, it widened and there was a space there of half-a-dozen acres, with a thicket of trees upon either side of the trail and huge bowlders of rocks here and there scattered about.

This had been the battle ground, where fell the murdered drivers and passengers, and where were the graves of the slain in combat, as well as those shot from ambush.

As they neared this dreaded spot, Buffalo Bill drew rein, and, after a halt of a minute, all listened attentively, and hearing no sound they moved on once more.

They had neared the other side of the open space when Buffalo Bill's horse gave a startled snort.

"Well, Buckskin, what is it?" and the scout quickly dismounted and went ahead on foot, the others waiting.

Soon they saw a match lighted and beheld the scout bending over something on the ground.

"We are too late, sir. Please come here," he called out, and Captain May and the two scouts reached the spot together.

Dismounting, they beheld Buffalo Bill lighting a lantern, and when he flashed its rays upon the scene all were appalled at what they beheld.

There was the coach not far away, the tired horses standing with drooping heads.

Upon the box, the reins still grasped in his hands, was Christopher.

But he was dead.

Lying upon the ground were the dead bodies of the three miners.

But, search as they might, nowhere could be found the bodies of Miss Dean, the sergeant's wife and the young soldier.

What had become of them, what their fate had been, was wrapped in mystery.

They stood in silence, and with uncovered heads, out

of respect to the dead, for Buffalo Bill had removed his sombrero as he came upon the tragic spectacle, and the others had followed his example.

"My God, Cody! What does it mean?" at last broke from the lips of Captain May.

"It means, sir, that those who have done this deed are determined to kill as well as rob their victims, and to show us they dare do those red deeds in our very faces," was the earnest reply.

"But who has done this red deed?"

"Who has been guilty of the other tragedies enacted here, Captain May?"

"Heaven only knows. But can you not discover whether Indians or road agents are the guilty ones?"

"When the morning comes, perhaps so, sir, as we are so soon upon the scene this time; but not until then."

"Now, what is to be done?"

"I will send one of my scouts back to the fort at once, sir, to report to Colonel Miles, what we have discovered, and the other on to Fort Famine to report the occurrence there."

"That is right; but let us see if we cannot find some trace of Miss Dean, the sergeant's wife and the young soldier who were reported as passengers upon the coach."

"Had we not best wait until morning, sir, so that no other trail will be made save those of the scouts going to the forts, for we can stay in the coach, sir, and your troopers can be halted before reaching here."

"You are right, Cody. But I will write a line to poor Dean."

This Captain May did, and the scout mounted and rode on his way, the other one having already started to head off the troopers and then continue on to report to Colonel Miles the sad discovery made at the gap.

The scouts gone, Buffalo Bill and Captain May got into the coach and made themselves as comfortable as they could, anxious to get all the sleep possible, as they expected a hard day of it on the morrow.

They had staked their horses out, though there was no grass or water near for them, and they were forced to make a dry camp of it.

With the first glimmer of dawn coming into the pass, they left the coach, and while Buffalo Bill went at once to work reading "signs" the captain rode back to the camp of his troopers to bring them upon the scene.

In half an hour he returned, and when the sunlight was beginning to peer down into the canyon.

A soldier had been stationed at the opening into the wide space, upon either side, to keep any one coming from the forts back, and the others, after a cold breakfast, washed down with water from their canteens, were placed in positions by Buffalo Bill to make what search they could for any signs they might find of trails.

There were the graves of the dead Indians slain in battle long before; near were the graves of the soldiers who had more lately fallen, and in a row near the trail were buried the victims of those who had haunted the gap to kill and to rob.

Near the coach were the bodies of the dead miners, and still upon his box was poor Christopher.

All had been shot, and all had been robbed of every valuable they possessed, their weapons being also taken.

But in the hard ground about the scene of death, there was no trace of a trail.

The tracks of the horses and the wheels of the coach had hardly left an impression.

Each entrance to the scene of the tragedy was most carefully examined by the scout, and no trail led into it, save that of the coach and their own.

The trail of the scout sent to Fort Famine here and there could be seen.

It was plain that Buffalo Bill was puzzled, that the king of trailers was thwarted for once in his life.

With their tired horses, the two scouts sent to the forts could not ride fast, and it was an hour after sunrise before the soldier on duty reported a force coming from Fort Rest.

Soon after another force came from Fort Famine.

With the former came Colonel Miles himself, and a troop of cavalry, and with the latter was Major Dean, with a party of troopers. All met in the open space where the red deeds had been committed, but they had all come too late to save.

The face of Major Dean was stern and white, for he was a widower, and Hilda was his only child, who had just finished her school days and had come to make her home with him at Fort Famine, where other officers had their wives and families.

She had begged so hard in her letters to come, that at last he had consented, and changing his mind, when he regarded the dangers, he had written her not to come.

But the letter had arrived after her departure, for she had started sooner than she had anticipated.

Warmly did Colonel Miles grasp his hand in sympathy, and then turned to the poor sergeant who had also come to learn what the fate of his wife had been.

"What does it mean, colonel?" asked Major Dean.

"Alas, I do not know, and Cody can give no explanation," was the reply.

"Well, her body not being here, I feel that she must at least be alive; but suffering what?" sadly said the major.

Buffalo Bill would say nothing.

Other scouts had come with the parties from the forts, and these Buffalo Bill had at once set to work, giving them no clew, and was waiting to hear what they had to report.

While waiting, he walked to where Colonel Miles, the major and Captain May were.

"Any clew?" asked the colonel.

"I sent for my best men, sir, and those from Fort Famine, and all are now at work, and I hope some may be able to discover something, sir."

"What is your theory?"

"I can discover no trace of a trail, so that would indicate that the murderers were on foot, more likely Indians, and yet it does not look like the work of Indians."

"How so?"

"Charlie was shot on his box, sir, and neither he nor the miners are scalped.

"The soldier is not to be found, and Miss Dean and Sergeant Gale's wife are missing, sir, and what has become of them I cannot say.

"Had Indians attacked from an ambush they would have riddled the stage with bullets, and there is not a fresh mark upon it, only those fired into it on previous occasions.

"All were robbed, and yet the gaudy red sash Charlie wore was not taken, and an Indian could hardly have resisted taking that."

"Then you lean to the belief that they were whites who did the work?"

"Yes, colonel, I do, but my men will report as they make a discovery or give up the game, and then we may know more.

"I have been over the whole scene, and confess myself beaten."

"Then your men will surely be; but what do you think of the soldier, Miss Dean and Gales' wife having been captured and carried off?"

"That is what puzzles me most, sir.

"If the soldier had not been taken I might understand that the two women were taken as hostages, or for ransom; but the soldier's going I cannot yet comprehend."

One by one the scouts came in, and each one had the same report to make.

They looked anxious and seemed to feel their inability to make a report of some kind.

But noon had come and all were of the same opinion, that the murderers, be they Indians or road agents, had covered up their tracks too well to be followed.

As there was neither water nor grass near, a move must be made, and then Buffalo Bill asked Colonel Miles to allow him to drop out of the line on the march back, and returning to the canyon, go on a still hunt alone to solve the mystery.

This request was granted, and Buffalo Bill was to have provisions sent him by the stage on its return, for a scout was to drive it on to Fort Famine, and back again to Trail End City, on condition that the chief of scouts should remain in the fatal pass and await his coming.

That Buffalo Bill was to remain was known only to Colonel Miles, the scout who was to drive the coach, and to Major Dean.

CHAPTER IV.

MORE MYSTERY.

The miners had been buried where they met their death, while the body of poor Charlie had been laid to rest in the separate row of graves which marked the last resting-place of the drivers who had fallen on the fatal trail.

Major Dean had returned to Fort Famine in an agony of suspense about his daughter, as had also the sergeant, but both felt they left the solution of the mystery in the hands of the only man who could solve it, Buffalo Bill.

Colonel Miles had gone back to his command feeling some anxiety regarding Buffalo Bill, for the mysterious murderers, who never held back from a stage load of passengers, must be in large enough force to readily get away with one man, even if he was the chief of scouts, who was noted as one "worth a dozen ordinary men."

The coach made its run on to the fort, under the scout Diamond Dan, and started almost at once upon its return, being a day behind schedule time.

The soldiers saw it go with misgivings, and many bade Diamond Dan good-by, expecting never to see him again.

But it had been the wish of Buffalo Bill for it to come without an escort, that he might discover the mystery of the murders in the gap.

He had explained to Colonel Miles that a guard for the coach might protect it in the canyon, but the moment they left it there would be an attack elsewhere, and this would not be finding the murderers.

Then, too, the soldiers could not be spared for the work, and that the sure means to check the evil by finding the outlaws would be to secretly discover who they were.

The colonel and his officers realized the truth of this argument, and so Buffalo Bill was left alone.

It was night when Diamond Dan reached the gap, and he drove into it with misgivings, for he was alone, not a soul caring to make the trip back with him.

He passed the scene of the murders with his heart almost seeming to stand still, and started as he went by and heard a voice behind him say:

"Ho, Dan, there is nobody abroad to-night."

"It is you, chief," cried Dan, with a deep sigh of relief, as Buffalo Bill climbed up over the top of the stage and came to the box.

"Yes, I have not seen a sign of any one.

"I heard you coming, and was in ambush, ready for an attack, if any came, but they were not here to-night, so I'm going on with you."

"You bet I'm glad of it, chief, for I was frightened, I admit it."

"Well, you showed your pluck in going on the coach as you did, Dan, and you shall have full credit for it."

"But you could find no trace of the murderers, sir?"

"Not the slightest."

"You can't think who they can be?"

"I cannot, for they have covered up their tracks with the cunning of Indians."

"Maybe they be Injuns."

"I think not; but my horse is yonder up the valley, so I will mount him and follow you a quarter of a mile behind, in case you are attacked at some other point."

"Keep a leetle closer, chief, please, for this be a lone-some trail to travel."

"I will be within hearing, Dan, never fear."

"Yes, for there is a treasure box aboard."

"Ah! From the mines?"

"Yes; nigh onter ten thousand in dust, I heard."

"All right."

With this Buffalo Bill got down from the box, and, while Diamond Dan drove on he went up the valley for his horse.

To his surprise he found the animal was not there.

He supposed that he had pulled up his stake rope and gone astray; but searching for his saddle and bridle, found that they, too, were gone.

Somebody has stolen him.

"Well, I cannot overtake Diamond Dan on foot, that is certain, so I will camp here, look for the trail of my horse in the morning, and when I do not come in behind the coach, Colonel Miles will send after me, I know.

"But who has got my horse is the question that I would like answered."

With this the scout rolled his blankets about him and sought forgetfulness in slumber.

The sentinel on the tower at Fort Rest spied in the early morning the coach coming slowly along the trail.

The horses were in a walk and came along as though they had been hard driven.

The coming of the coach was reported to the corporal of the guard, who in turn reported it to his superior officers, and soon after came another report that the driver of the coach was asleep on his box.

The gates were thrown open; the officer of the day met the coach, the team was brought to a halt and then came the startling cry:

"Diamond Dan, the scout driver, is dead!"

The words were true.

There sat Diamond Dan upon his box, his body tied in place by a lariat, his head hanging forward, and the reins wrapped around his hands securely.

But he was dead, and a bullet wound was in his temple.

What did it mean? Where was Buffalo Bill?

These questions could not be answered by a tongue silenced in death, and so the officer of the post hastened to Colonel Miles with the report of the tragedy—another deadly mystery of Graveyard Gap.

Colonel Miles was astounded, startled, and Captain May and his troop were at once ordered back over the trail.

They departed within half an hour, while another scout mounted the box and drove the coach on its way to Trail End City, several passengers going in it on the eastward run.

Captain May lost no time on the trail, but went along at a sweeping gallop.

As he neared the dreaded spot, his horses all foaming and panting, they saw a tall form standing in the trail awaiting them.

It was Buffalo Bill.

At sight of him the soldiers broke forth in a cheer, for they expected that they would find his body only.

"Ho, captain, glad to see you.

"But what's the hurry, for your horses have been pushed hard I see?"

"What is the hurry, Cody, when we expected to find you dead?" cried Captain May, sternly.

"Dead? Oh, no, sir; but I suppose it was because I did not follow the coach in, as I told Diamond Dan I would. But my horse was spirited away, captain, and I could not."

"Perhaps it is well you did not follow Diamond Dan in, Bill, for he is dead."

The scout started and his bronzed face grew sad as he repeated the words:

"Diamond Dan dead!"

"Yes, he came in just after dawn, tied to his box, the reins fast in his hands, and with a bullet wound in his left temple."

"My God!

"Poor, poor Dan!

"Oh, that I could only have followed him."

"Your horse was stolen, you say, Bill?"

"Yes, sir. I left Dan right at this spot and went up the valley where I had staked my horse, a quarter of a mile from here.

"I found him gone, and that my saddle and bridle were also missing.

"To overtake Dan on foot I knew was impossible, with a start of a mile, and besides I wished to have a search for the trail of my horse, feeling sure Colonel Miles would send after me."

"And what was the result of your search, Cody?"

"Captain May, I flatter myself that I am a good trailer, but I can no more find the trail of my horse than I can fly."

"The ground is too hard?"

"Not that, only there is no trail."

"Let us return to the place, Bill, and camp, so we can give another search for it."

The scout led the way, asking as he started off:

"Was the treasure box also taken, sir?"

"From the coach?"

"Yes, sir."

"There was none there."

"Then it was taken, for there was a box with ten thousand in dust on board, so Dan said."

"I searched the coach, and none was there."

"You found the scene of the hold-up, sir?"

"No, we pushed right on to look you up."

"Well, we can see on our way back where it was, and there must be a trail leading from there."

"Yes, surely."

They had now reached the camping-place, and breakfast was cooked, while the horses were staked out.

But search as they might, no trail led away from the spot where Buffalo Bill had left his horse, though the track leading to it was plainly seen.

After hours spent in search the party started upon the return to the fort, hoping to find the trail from the place where the coach had been held up.

With the skill of an Indian, Buffalo Bill followed the trail of the coach back to the fort.

Behind him came two scouts, who had come with the troop, and then the troopers, all watching for any sign that might have missed the eye of the chief.

Though the passing along of the troop had greatly marred the trail of the coach, still if there had been any tracks leading to and from it on either side, the keen eyes of the scouts would have detected them.

But the troop went slowly along, for Buffalo Bill and his two men were on foot, and often came to a halt as they examined the trail.

But just at sunset they came in view of the fort, and soon after Buffalo Bill and Captain May were in the presence of Colonel Miles, the chief of scout's return alive having been greeted with cheers by those in the fort.

The scout made his report, and Captain May told all

that he had to say, and then waited for the colonel to speak.

"I do not understand it—I do not know what to say. When the coach next goes through, it must have an escort, though a small one, as I am determined to start to-night upon this expedition, to strike the Indians in their villages before they get ready to raid upon us, which they are preparing to do."

"You, Cody, I must have with the command, and Major Dean is to meet us with his force, and thus act as a support, perhaps join us in the attack."

"Now who shall I have to guard the coach?"

"Allow me to suggest, sir, that you order Bolton, who is the next driver, to go through by daylight, remaining at the fort all night, and to come back the following day, sir."

"I will do so, for this will do away with an escort, which I am not allowed to furnish, and only would do so in case of direst necessity."

"But you could send a couple of your men, Cody, to scout in Graveyard Gap, as you did, and thus serve as a protection, and perhaps discover something about those fiends."

"I can, sir, and will do so. I will send two of my best scouts."

"Do so, and they might go to-morrow night, prepared to remain until you recall them, so that the drivers will know that there is help near."

The orders were given then for the troops to get ready for the march up into the Indian country, one troop going at once, by way of Death's Canyon, to Fort Famine, to order Major Dean also to move with his men to a certain point in the mountains and join the force from Fort Rest.

Buffalo Bill picked out two of his men, and ordered them to take their best horses, plenty of ammunition, and provisions for several weeks, and go to the gap, or near it, where they could camp, but to be on duty by night in the canyon, and by day when the coach was expected through.

It was just after midnight when the command, consisting of five companies of mounted infantry, one battery of four guns and two troops of cavalry, with a dozen scouts under Buffalo Bill, moved out of the fort, at their head being Colonel Miles himself, who had almost

stripped the stockade of defenders to deal a blow against the redskins in their strongholds.

Just before dawn, the troop having arrived with others, Major Dean left Fort Famine with three companies of mounted infantry, two troops of cavalry and a section of light artillery, while half-a-dozen scouts were in the advance.

With this force, Colonel Miles hoped to deal a very severe blow upon the Indians.

The two commands met at noon the next day, thirty miles out from the forts, and went into camp until nightfall, when they intended making a forced march of thirty miles more so as to attack the Indian village at dawn, thus surprising them in their stronghold.

Major Dean's face was pale with sorrow and suspense, as he greeted his commander, and the two officers held a long talk together over the situation and the fact that no clew had been found as to the fate of the three captives taken from Christopher's coach, or the perpetrators of the deed.

"I live in hopes that we may find them in the Indian villages, for you will attack the lower village, sir, upon your retreat," said Major Dean.

"Yes, I shall strike the stronghold at dawn, wipe it out if in our power to do so, and retreating rapidly the fifteen miles to the hunting village, will fall upon that, thus giving the Indians a double lesson to remember."

CHAPTER V.

THE ATTACK ON THE INDIAN STRONGHOLD.

It was well known to Colonel Miles that there were a couple of thousand warriors in the Sioux stronghold, which he was to attack, and half as many more in the hunting village overlooking the plains, where they got their game.

But he was well aware that to keep them from getting on the offensive against the two posts, he must do some daring act that would strike terror to their hearts.

He was also aware that in the stronghold there were all of a hundred white captives, men, women and children, and these could only be reached by such a bold stroke as it was his intention to deliver.

His little army was a command of veterans, men who had long fought redskins, and knew that a stampede

meant death to all, so that he could rely on them, while Buffalo Bill and his scouts were one and all heroes.

They had camped in a secure hiding-place by day, building no fire until after nightfall, when supper was cooked, and all prepared for the rapid march to the Indian stronghold.

The scouts started well in advance, to be sure there was no ambush, and the men mounting their well-rested horses, and with the wheels of the guns heavily wrapped, to prevent sound, they moved out upon their march.

At two o'clock a halt was called, for the stronghold of the Indians was in sight, a mile away, and Buffalo Bill reported all quiet there.

The men and horses had a couple of hours' rest, then an early breakfast, which was cold, however, and Buffalo Bill having explained the situation of the stronghold, there were three columns of infantry sent against it.

The guns were placed in position, to open fire when the infantry had gained places for action, and the cavalrymen stood by their horses, ready to mount and at them, when their time to strike should come, the scouts taking places where they could do most good.

Just as the gray of dawn began to steal over the mountains, so that the gunners could see where to fire, the order was given, and six guns, two twelve-pounders and four sixes, flashed forth red flames and sent terrific roars echoing from cliff to cliff.

The shells went crashing down into the village, bursting viciously among the tepees, and scattering death and destruction around, for Buffalo Bill had made known where the captives were kept, so that their position was avoided by the gunners.

It was a complete surprise, and after several rounds from the guns, the infantry, with wild cheers, advanced upon the stronghold at a double-quick.

As they reached the village and their muskets began to rattle, the cavalrymen mounted and rode down to the attack also.

The soldiers soon saw that the fight was theirs, and they pushed rapidly on, stampeding the women and children, driving the warriors before them, and setting fire to the tepees.

The captives were rescued, and sent quickly on the trail, whither two guns, a company of mounted infantry and a troop of cavalry were now marching.

The ponies in the corral had been stampeded, but

many were captured, and within an hour's time the stronghold was a ruin, its people fugitives among the mountains, save the braves, who were rallying for a blow against their victors.

Down upon the hunting valley swooped the retreating victors, and they were met by the warriors there who had been alarmed by the firing, and hoped to check the retreat.

But the guns cut gaps in their ranks, the infantry charged, and when the cavalry came in sight, the redskins fled for their lives, leaving their village unprotected.

Here, too, other captives were rescued, and the tepees of the redskins were set on fire.

Rapidly then the retreat was kept up, the cavalry protecting the rear, until the pursuit became too hot, when the guns would be wheeled about and the savages sent to the rear by a few well-aimed shots.

That night the soldiers' camp was besieged, but no attack was made, for the redskins had received too severe a lesson.

They, however, sent many a shot into the camp, but retreated at dawn, and the march back to the fort was begun, a camp of a couple of days being made at the point where the commands had met on their way up into the mountains.

Colonel Miles had halted on the way back, to check any advance the warriors might attempt to make against the forts in their desperation.

The scouts had been left behind under Buffalo Bill to report any movement of the redskins that might look hostile, and so the soldiers awaited their coming.

The dead had been buried, the wounded cared for and the captives who had been rescued, a hundred in number, were sent on to the forts.

But when the third day passed and Buffalo Bill came in to report that the redskins who had pursued had returned to the mountains, and were too much demoralized to recover for some time, the commands divided and marched for their respective forts.

The hope of Major Dean, that he would find his daughter a captive in one of the Indian villages, had not been realized, and the closest questioning of those who were rescued, failed to discover that they knew aught of her.

Nor could it be ascertained from the captives that the

Indians were in any way connected with the perpetrators of the foul deeds in the gap, for such had been the opinion of many.

"I have only you to depend on now, Cody, so I leave all in your hands," sadly said Major Dean as he parted with the scout.

"I shall do all in my power, major, to return your daughter to you and to punish her kidnappers.

"That the three captives taken from the coach were not found in the Indian villages is to me a strong hope that they are held for ransom by road-agents, and that no harm will befall them.

"It is unfortunate indeed, but from all accounts Miss Dean is a very plucky young lady, and will bear her captivity with a good grace."

"Then you will go again upon the trail of those murderers, as soon as you return to the fort, Cody?"

"I will, sir, and you know that I now have two men on duty in the canyon, and as the coach is to go through to-day, we may get news upon our arrival, and you shall be at once informed of the result, major."

"I thank you, Cody, and I rely on you," and grasping the scout's hand, the major rode on after his command.

As he passed to the front of Colonel Miles' command, Buffalo Bill was called by that officer, who said:

"Well, Cody, we gave the redskins a lesson to remember?"

"You did, indeed, sir, and one they will not soon forget, for you killed and wounded many, and it will take a long time for them to recover from the blow you dealt them, sir.

"It was a brave move, Colonel Miles, and you deserved the success you have won."

"Thank you, Cody, and a success which your valuable services made possible, aided by the brave men under my command.

"We lost heavily, I admit, but we rescued many poor captives, and have greatly strengthened our position on the frontier.

"But now what are we going to learn at the fort about the doings at Death Gap?"

"I hope my men have made some discovery, sir, and that Ben Bolton, going through by day, will avoid the fate of the other drivers, but I am doubtful, sir."

"As am I; but what do you think of not finding Miss

Dean, the sergeant's wife and the young soldier, captives in neither of the Indian villages, Cody?"

"That Indians are not the murderers, sir, that haunt Graveyard Gap."

"But white men are?"

"Yes, sir."

"But who?"

"That is to be discovered, sir, but they are outlaws, road-agents, of course."

"And where are they?"

"That I must find out, sir."

"No one reports seeing them, or having done so."

"Very few live, sir, to make any report of an attack on a coach on the fatal trail."

"That is true. Yet do you think Miss Dean and the other two were slain?"

"If so, sir, we cannot find their bodies, and if not killed, then the road-agents acted differently toward them from the way they served their other victims."

"You are right, and, if they killed them, for some reason of their own, concealed their bodies."

"I do not believe that they killed them, Colonel Miles."

"Miss Dean might be held for ransom, for she is an heiress, yet why the sergeant's wife and the young soldier?"

"That is what I do not know, sir; but did you discover to which command the young soldier was going, sir?"

"I did not, for nothing was known of him whatever at either fort."

"He may have been on leave, sir, going to Fort Famine to visit some relative or friend."

"I will find out from the stage company what his name was, and then we can discover who he was," and saluting the colonel, Buffalo Bill rode on ahead of the column.

CHAPTER VI.

MORE VICTIMS.

Buffalo Bill was the first to enter the fort, and his inquiry regarding Ben Bolton, the second of the volunteer drivers to take the stage through, was quickly made.

The answer was that Bolton had come through two days before alone on the coach, no passengers daring to

venture, and that he had been detained all night, returning by day through the gap.

As he had started early he was due hours before, and even starting late upon his return, he was long behind the time for his arrival.

Buffalo Bill looked serious, and waited for the coming up of the column at the head of the command.

Those who had gone in with the wounded soldiers, and the captives, had told of the double victory, so that the contingent left in the fort turned out to welcome the command.

Guns were fired, cheers resounded and the band played, as the tired soldiers filed into the stockade.

While they marched to their respective barracks, the colonel gave orders that a line of scouts should be thrown around the fort, that the guards should be doubled and the men should, as it were, sleep on their arms, for he did not know but that the cunning savages might seek revenge, expecting to catch the garrison off its guard, by rushing in upon them with an overwhelming force of warriors.

These orders issued, the colonel turned to Buffalo Bill and said:

"Now, Cody, you have something to communicate."

Buffalo Bill told what he had heard, and the colonel also looked serious.

"I will start on the trail, sir, as soon as I have had supper and gotten a fresh horse," said Buffalo Bill.

"But you are worn out."

"No, indeed, sir, I am all right, colonel."

"Well, it would be the best thing to do, Cody, I admit, if the coach does not come in meanwhile."

"Who will you take with you?"

"I will go alone, sir."

"Better take some force along in case you need aid."

"Well, sir, I will take half-a-dozen scouts, and they can camp in the valley this side of the canyon, where I left my horse, while I will go through alone on foot."

"You will be taking big risks."

"That is the only way, sir, to find out who these murderers are."

"Well, I trust all will be right, only do not be too rash," was the colonel's response, and the scout departed.

Going to his quarters, he selected half-a-dozen of his

best men, and having had supper, mounted a fresh horse and rode away from the fort.

No sign of the coach had been reported, and the more he thought of it, the more certain Buffalo Bill felt that either Bolton had never reached Fort Famine or, doing so, had been killed upon his return, for it could not be that the brave fellow had, at the last moment, failed to make the attempt to go through.

On to the camping-place at a brisk canter went the scout and his men, and there he left them, along with his horse.

He had expected to find the horses of the other two scouts there, but in the darkness they were not visible, as a short search revealed.

Then he set out, with a scout accompanying him to lead his horse back after he should have gone a few miles.

The scout went with him near to the scene so fatal to the drivers, when the chief dismounted and sent him back to the camp.

"If you do not see me, or hear from me by noon, Bob, come after me all of you, for I may need you," were his parting orders.

Then he went on his way on foot, and after half an hour approached the open space where were the graves of the dead victims of the mysterious murderers.

He went cautiously along, gliding among the stunted trees and boulders that were there, and at last saw something loom up ahead of him.

"It is the coach," he muttered, and at once became still more cautious, for a closer look through the darkness revealed the fact that the horses were there also.

The scout remained for a long while silently watching the coach and waiting.

He saw that the horses were restless, and swerved considerably, yet no voice was heard soothing them.

At last he said to himself:

"There is no living being there, that is certain.

"Poor Bolton is there; yes, I am sure of it now.

"But he is dead."

With this the chief of scouts moved from his hiding-place, and cautiously approached the coach.

The horses quickly discovered him, and one of them neighed a welcome.

This was further proof to Buffalo Bill that if a human being was there, it was a dead one.

He spoke soothingly to the horses, and saw that they were glad of his coming.

Then he approached the coach.

Upon the box he saw a dark object, and quickly he mounted to the driver's seat.

It was Bolton, but he was dead!

The scout muttered an imprecation, and a quick search revealed that the driver had been shot at his post, his body falling back upon the top of the coach, the reins still clutched in his stiffened fingers.

Ben had been robbed, for his pockets were turned inside out, and, to prevent the team from going on, the wheels of the coach had been firmly lashed together.

"Where are my two scouts, Bennett and Hill?" the scout leader asked himself, as he looked about him, trying in vain to pierce the darkness.

Then, revolver in hand, for he had gone about his search prepared for any emergency, he opened the coach door.

He could not see within, for it was so intensely dark; but he stretched forth his hand and felt within.

He touched a leg and then another.

Yes, there were two forms in the coach, both in the back seat, and both dead.

No; one leg seemed warm, and quickly springing upon the step he seized the hand and felt the pulse.

It was beating, yet feebly.

In an instant the chief of scouts had taken a match from his case and struck it.

The flame revealed to Buffalo Bill the two scouts whom he had sent to protect the coach through Death Canyon.

He uttered a cry as he recognized them, in the flash of the light of the match, and having seen that one of the men was alive, for he had heard a low moan, he took the dead one from the seat, made the living man as comfortable as he could with the cushions, and closed the stage door.

Then the lashings of the wheels were cut, and mounting the box, Buffalo Bill placed Ben on top, tying his body so that it would not fall off, and seizing the reins sent the horses along at a thundering pace.

They were only too anxious to go, and went at a gallop over a trail on which only a driver of skill and nerve would dare force them at such a rate.

As he neared the camp of the scouts, Buffalo Bill

opened fire with his revolver, and by the time he passed along the trail nearest to them, they came dashing down to meet him, mounted and ready for battle.

"Ho, men! Go to the Death Gap, but go on foot when you get near it, leaving one of your number to keep the horses.

"At daylight look for trails, and I will be back as soon as I can return and there join you.

"Bolton is dead on top of this coach, and within are Bennett and Hill, the latter still alive, so I am going to see if he can be saved by getting him to the fort."

With this the lash fell upon the horses and the eager team dashed away once more at the same rattling speed as before.

As the sun was rising, the sentinel on the watch tower reported the coming of the coach at the full speed of the horses, the driver laying on the lash.

Soon after he reported that the driver was not Bolton, but Buffalo Bill, but that there was a dead body on the top of the coach.

Word was at once sent to Colonel Miles, so that when the coach dashed up to the stockade that officer was up and dressed.

As Buffalo Bill whirled through the gate, he called out:

"Arouse the surgeon at once, for I have a wounded man here."

Halting at the station, Buffalo Bill sprang to the ground, threw open the door, and placing his hand upon the pulse of the wounded man, cried:

"Thank Heaven, he is still alive.

"But he has been hard hit, and more than once, too."

He then lifted the wounded scout tenderly from the coach, and placed him upon the stretcher which four soldiers had hastily brought from the hospital.

The surgeon was there also, and ordered the wounded man carried quickly to a cabin near the hospital, as Buffalo Bill said earnestly:

"Save him, doctor, not only for his own sake, for he is a splendid fellow, but because he can tell us who these murderers of the gap are—he can solve the mystery if you save him."

"I will do my best, Cody, but he is a desperately wounded man," was the surgeon's response.

Buffalo Bill then hastened on to headquarters, where he found Colonel Miles ready to receive him.

"You have news, Cody?"

"Yes, sir, very sad news," and Buffalo Bill made known all that had occurred since his departure from the fort.

"This is appalling, Cody, simply appalling," said the colonel sternly.

"It is, sir, but the more determined am I to sift the whole mystery to the bottom."

"I am glad to hear you say this, Buffalo Bill, for it means that the guilty ones will yet be found and punished.

"But what is to be done now?"

"I'll send one of my scouts on with the coach, sir, and the report to Trail End City, and Hawkshaw will bring it back, and my man with him."

"But will Hawkshaw dare drive the coach through after these last murders?"

"Yes, sir, he will, for I know the man."

"And then?"

"When he goes through Graveyard Gap, sir, be it night or day, going or coming, I will be on hand to lend any aid that he may need, and discover where the murderers are."

"Not alone, surely?"

"Yes, sir, I'll play a lone hand on the next run of the coach, and after that, if I do not make a discovery, I'll try another plan, which I have yet to make known to you, sir."

"All right, Cody, I feel that the affair is in good hands, so you shall have your way.

"Now what hope does Dr. Brand give you of saving Hill's life?"

"None, sir; but while there is life there is hope, is my belief, and if he can only bring him around to talk, much will have been gained."

"Let us go then and see what the result is so far; but I forget that you need rest and food."

"Don't mind me, colonel, for I'll get breakfast soon and then take a fresh horse for camp, where I can sleep for some hours."

"Well, we will go together to the hospital."

The colonel and Buffalo Bill then walked to the hospital and Dr. Brand met them at the door.

"What hope, Brand?" asked the scout.

"I fear none, sir, for he has a wound in the left lung,

and another in the right side, with a third that grazed the skull.

"Had he not arrived when he did, he could not have lasted much longer, for he was bleeding freely."

"He is unconscious then?"

"Wholly unconscious, colonel, in spite of all efforts to rouse him; but he has a splendid constitution and may rally."

"Heaven grant it."

"How long, Surgeon Brand, would you think he had been wounded when I got him, which was two o'clock?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"I should say for four or five hours at least, from what observation I was enabled to make," was the reply.

"Then he was shot late in the afternoon?"

"He must have been."

"And in passing through Graveyard Gap at daylight?"

"Yes."

"This is remarkable, for there were Bolton, the driver, and my two scouts for the murderers to face, so there surely must have been a large force that ambushed them," said Buffalo Bill, thoughtfully.

CHAPTER VII.

ON WATCH.

Surgeon Brand could give Buffalo Bill no more hope for Hill, the scout, and so he mounted a fresh horse and dashed away toward the gap.

He reached the camping-place before sunset, and there found two of the scouts with the horses, the other having remained on the search.

Before these two could say anything regarding the search for the trail of the murderers, the other four scouts came in sight.

"Ho, pards, any news?" called out Buffalo Bill as they appeared.

They looked a trifle confused at seeing their chief, and one said:

"No, chief, we could not find even the photograph of a trail, and we looked close, too."

"Why did you leave the canyon before I came to join you?"

"Fact is, chief, we saw night was coming on, and that

canyon hain't no place for live folks when the sun goes down."

"You were afraid, eh?"

"You know us all, chief, and is aware we don't scare easy, but that canyon and what goes on there is out of ther common, yer see, and we put it to ther vote as ter whether we should go or stay."

"Well?"

"Ther vote were unanimous that we should light out."

"Well, boys, I can hardly blame you; but you should never desert your post, you know."

"That's so, Chief Cody; but them we was guarding was dead folks and they didn't need us, and if live folks was about they war so hid as ter make dead folks out of us when night come on."

"All right, we will go to camp and have supper, and then I will go on foot to the canyon and see if I can find any spook or outlaw."

"Don't do it, Bill!"

"Why not?"

"Them as has turned up their toes in that canyon never gets a chance ter draw a weapon, that is certain."

"I'll have to take the chances, you know, and I was there last night."

"Yes, and Bolton and two of our pards went under last night."

"They were killed in the afternoon, but then Hill may survive, though the chances are against him."

"I'm glad to hear that; but couldn't he talk and tell yer anything?"

"No, he was unconscious."

"Well, if he could talk he could tell it all."

"I only hope that he will be able to do so," and with this Buffalo Bill rode on to the camp.

He ate a hearty supper, enjoyed his pipe, and just as the shadows began to fall upon the valley, started off on foot for Death Canyon.

His men begged him not to go, but seeing him determined to do so, wanted to go with him.

But he said that one could escape notice when half-a-dozen could not, and he would go alone.

He had put on moccasins, so that his step was noiseless, and as he disappeared in the gathering gloom, he drew a revolver in each hand, thus carrying them ready for instant use.

Reaching the canyon, he moved more cautiously and slowly, and at last came to the opening which had been the scene of so many red deeds, all of which lay buried in the deepest mystery.

He crept along among the stunted trees and the rocks until he reached the spot where he had twice found the stage coach,

All was as silent as the grave.

No wolf was even whining around in search of food, and the weird ghoulish spot seemed even deserted by wild beasts and night birds.

The chief of scouts stood for a long while gazing about him through the almost impenetrable gloom, his thoughts busy.

Not far away were the graves, the white boards marking the last resting-places of the brave drivers, dimly seen in the somber light, or rather darkness, for light there was none.

At last the scout felt a drowsy feeling creeping over him.

He had gone through much, and was very tired, so he decided to lie down, knowing that he would awaken, fatigued as he was, at the first sound.

When he awoke he sprang to his feet in surprise, for the sun was shining brightly, and he had not been disturbed through the night by outlaw, spook or wandering spirit.

Buffalo Bill felt mortified at his having slumbered so soundly through the night, and yet he could not but think that there had been no one near, or he would instinctively have felt their presence and awakened.

His training had been such that he had come to have the acute hearing of a dog, the instinct of a wild beast, almost, to protect himself and discover danger near.

He looked about him, and knew that the sun was all of two hours high.

Then he searched around for any trail, but only the stale ones were visible here and there in the hard soil.

As he could make no discovery, and the stage was not due coming that way again for days, he thought it best to go back to the fort with his men, and start off again upon a lone scout just before Hawkshaw should come through.

So back to the camp he started, to meet his comrades coming to look for him, they having become anxious regarding his safety.

"Any news, chief?" asked one.

"No, for I could find no trail of any kind to indicate where the murderers came from, and whither they went."

"Did you stay in the canyon all night, Pard Bill?" another one asked.

"Oh, yes, and slept serenely most of the time."

"Yer slept?"

"Yes."

"I wouldn't close my eyes in that canyon, at night, for a dozen ponies."

"Why not?"

"With all them graves around."

"The dead would not trouble you, Nick, while the living would."

"Waal, I can't git familiar with dead folks, no matter how I tries."

"When a man has handed in his chips, somehow I fears him; yes, I is afeerd o' a leetle dead baby, even, for they is so silent, so white, and seem to be thinking so deep about what they is seeing in ther speritland."

"No, sir, no graveyards in mine."

Buffalo Bill laughed at Nick's earnest way of describing his fear of the dead, but not another one of the scouts did.

They all looked serious, and there was no doubt they felt as their comrade did, while their commander rose the higher in their estimation from his utter disregard of the supernatural.

So back to the fort went the scouts, and Buffalo Bill made his report to Colonel Miles, with sincere regret that he had nothing to tell to cast any light upon the situation.

But he told the colonel that it was his intention to go ahead of the coach at its next run, and to start the night before, taking up position in the canyon so as to be on the spot long ahead of time, and endeavor to anticipate the coming of the murderers.

"You will take men with you, Cody?"

"No, colonel, I will go alone, for a party of men would surely be seen."

"Upon one condition you can go then."

"Yes, colonel."

"Promise to obey my commands."

"Certainly, sir."

"Then you can go upon condition that you shall find

the securest hiding-places, and then, no matter what occurs, you are not to venture forth or attempt a rescue of the driver, if there are over three men to fight."

"Three men, sir?"

"Yes, three of these outlaws, murderers and robbers, for that number I feel you can stand a chance with, but more than that I do not wish you to face, even if you have the advantage of a surprise upon them."

"Yes, sir."

"You promise?"

"I do, sir."

"Well, under those circumstances you can go."

"May I ask, Colonel Miles, if there is any change for the better in Scout Hill's condition?"

"None."

"The surgeon then has no hope?"

"He has hope, yet it is so faint he hardly dares express it."

"The poor fellow lies in a state of coma, and neither speaks nor moves."

"He may rally yet, but the chances are against him, though Surgeon Brand is doing all in his power to save him—in fact, keeps by him night and day, for he knows how much depends upon his being able to state what occurred, independent of his wish to save him."

Soon after Buffalo Bill took his leave, and going to his quarters he found that there was much excitement in the fort about the murders committed in Graveyard Gap.

The days passed slowly until the eve of the one on which the coach was expected to arrive from Trail End City, when Buffalo Bill, after reporting to Colonel Miles, mounted his horse and rode away toward Death Canyon to go on duty as a lone watcher.

CHAPTER VIII.

NUMBER THREE.

There was general indignation against the unknown murderers, and a belief that Harry Hawkshaw should not go.

"No one will call him a coward if he don't," said one, and he echoed the sentiments of nearly all.

If there were any one who thought he should go, they were those who were his enemies for some reason or other.

The night Scout Casey brought the coach in, the gathering at the saloon of Peters' Hotel was enormous, including all the people in Trail End City with very few exceptions.

They played cards, drank, swore and canvassed the going of Hawkshaw, the remark often being heard that he was a fool to go to sure death.

"He hain't a-going," said a rough-looking man with an evil face.

"Who says so?" asked one.

"I does."

"How do you know, Jack Keeler, that Hawkshaw isn't going?"

"I knows it by what I knows of him."

"What is that?"

The man saw that every eye was upon him now, a dead silence had fallen upon the room, and he had to uphold his position taken against the young stage driver.

So he said:

"I knows he hain't got ther grit ter go, and when he said he would, it were jist a game of bluff."

"You lie, Jack Keeler!" rang out a clear voice from the crowd, followed closely by the words:

"And I am coming to make you eat your own words, so, pard, give us room."

The speaker was Hawkshaw himself, and he had just entered the saloon accompanied by Scout Casey, who had been up in the mountains to find him, and tell him of the fate of Bolton.

At his defiant words, and quick resenting of the charge against him, a cheer arose, while the crowd scattered right and left to open a lane between the two men, for they had learned by sad experience what being in the way meant.

Hardly had the lane opened when the two men stood alone, Jack Keeler having drawn a revolver in each hand, while Hawkshaw had not yet drawn his weapon.

But as Keeler opened fire, Hawkshaw, as quick as a flash, had his revolver out and pulled trigger.

The bullet crashed into Keeler's brain, and he dropped dead, while Hawkshaw called out:

"Is Doc, Sands here, for I've got a leaden pill in my leg."

The doctor was there, and going to Hawkshaw's side, the bullet was quickly extracted and the wound dressed.

"That settles it with you, Harry, for yer won't drive now," said a miner.

"You are mistaken, for I'd drive that hearse on the run if the bullet had half killed me," was the gritty response of the young driver.

And he kept his word, for when the day rolled round for the coach to start, Hawkshaw ordered the men to hitch up and drive around to bugle call, to let the passengers know that all was ready for the start.

"Heaven protect you, Harry," called out Peters, and many a good-will followed the plucky young driver, as with an empty coach, but with Scout Casey sitting upon the box by his side, he departed upon his perilous run that must take him where all felt sure that certain death awaited him.

It was the night before the coach was expected that Buffalo Bill quietly saddled his horse and had a scout ride out of the stockade gate with him.

Then he went to see Colonel Miles, and found Captain May with him.

"I am ready to start, sir," said the chief of scouts.

"Well, Cody, I dread to see you go alone, and yet you know best what you can do.

"But remember your promise."

"I will, sir."

"I'll court-martial you if you break your pledge," said the colonel, with a smile.

"I'll remember, sir.

"I sent my horse out, with a scout riding him, sir, and would like leave to slip out the headquarters gate, for I wish to be reported on the sick-list, and my going not be known."

"All right, Captain May will go with you to the headquarters gate, and bring me back the key."

The captain was most willing to do so, and with a shake of the hand, Buffalo Bill left the colonel, and soon passed out of the gate in the stockade road.

"I will send the scout here at once, sir, for he is but a short distance away," and Buffalo Bill bade the captain good-by and hastened out upon the prairie.

He soon found the scout, with his horse, and said:

"Ike, you must not be seen going back through the main entrance on foot, so go to the headquarters gate and Captain May will let you in."

"All right, Bill, and good luck to you," said the

scout, as Buffalo Bill leaped into his saddle and rode away in the darkness.

He took the stage trail to Fort Famine, and when he came to the creek, the last bit of water for many miles, he turned up the bank, and a quarter of a mile away found the camping-ground where his men had awaited him before.

He went further up the valley to where there was an open space, and the grass was long and beautiful.

Here he staked out his horse so that he could go to the edge of the creek, and drink, as well as get food, and then he went into a crevice of the rocks and cooked his supper.

This disposed of, and enough cooked besides for him to have a couple of days' cold provisions, he went on foot toward the gap.

It was a couple of hours before dawn when he reached the canyon, but he soon found a secure hiding-place, within easy pistol range of the graves and the spot where the coach had always been held up.

Spreading his blankets he lay down to rest, with the air of a man who had ample leisure on his hands.

The morning came, but he did not move from his position, but as patiently as an Indian ate his cold breakfast and remained in hiding.

Just at noon he heard the rumble of wheels, and at once he was on the alert.

He had brought his repeating rifle with him, and this was placed ready to grasp at an instant's notice, while his revolvers were in his hand as he crouched ready to attack the moment any foe of Harry Hawkshaw revealed himself.

In the excitement of the moment he had forgotten his promise to Colonel Miles, and there is no doubt but that he would have fought six or eight men, did they appear, for his position was well chosen among the rocks, shadowed by stunted trees, and with his deadly aim and a surprise, he felt he could render a good account of himself.

The coach drew nearer, and was coming along at a slapping pace.

It must come within twenty-five feet of his position, so he would have a good chance to see all that took place.

Nearer and nearer it came, and suddenly rolled into

view in the open space in the canyon, which had been fatal to so many people.

On it came, with Hawkshaw alone on the box, his reins grasped well in hand, his whole attitude that of a man on the alert.

As it drew nearer, Buffalo Bill saw that though Hawkshaw's face was pale, it was stern and fearless, like one who would do or die.

A moment more and the coach swept by, the driver not knowing that help was near, for the bold sentinel was unseen, his presence unknown.

"Well! That time the coach went through without a hold-up.

"Can it be that the murderers have gotten booty enough, or have become satiated in their greed for human life, I wonder?

"Ah! I forgot! there is a return run, a second gauntlet for Hawkshaw to pass through.

"And here I must wait, but I guess I can stand it."

So mused Buffalo Bill after the coach had gone by.

He rearranged his blankets, ate a cold dinner, washed it down by water from his canteen, and then settled himself on the watch for anything that might be seen.

"Harry is a plucky fellow, and I should hate to see harm befall him.

"He went by, ready to die, if need be, but full of grit, and it was no fixed expression, either, for he little dreamed that I was near.

"Well, it's to calmly wait now until to-morrow, so I must bring my Indian training of patience to bear upon myself."

Thus the afternoon passed slowly away.

A hungry wolf trotted into the canyon, sniffed at the new-made graves, and then, scenting danger, suddenly skulked away.

A bird of prey, as though recalling a spot where it had gotten food before, alighted not fifty feet from the scout.

Soon after several deer came bounding through the canyon, as though in fright of pursuers, and Buffalo Bill was at once on the alert.

But no one came into view, and at last the shadows began to fall upon the valley.

Afar off in the distant mountain tops the sunlight still lingered, but soon this faded from view, and intense darkness rested upon all.

Then the scout settled himself for slumber, and was soon serenely sleeping, wholly undisturbed by his weird and dismal surroundings.

The night passed away, and it was another cold breakfast of meat and bread with water to wash it down, yet apparently the meal was relished.

The scout was there for work, and he was willing to put up with anything to discover the secret he sought to unravel.

As the hours crept by he looked to his weapons, placed his repeating rifle in position for ready use, got his revolver within easy reach and waited.

Then came the distant rumble of wheels.

Not a human being had yet shown himself in the canyon.

Could it be that the murderers of the canyon had already given up their red work for gold?

It would seem so. Was Hawkshaw to pass safely the deadly gauntlet a second time?

Such were the thoughts that filled Buffalo Bill's mind as the sound of wheels grew louder and louder.

"Harry is driving very slowly this time, not like his run through on the outward trip.

"Well, I can see no danger awaiting him, and I am half inclined to go on with him to the camp, thus saving a walk to my horse.

"Ha! There comes the stage into view, and—Great heavens! there is no driver on the box," cried Buffalo Bill, suddenly springing from his place of ambush.

The words of the scout were but too true; there was no driver upon the box.

Where was Hawkshaw?

The team of six horses came trotting slowly along, the reins made fast around the brake on the right of the coach.

But the driver was not there!

Did not the horses know this?

Were they not doing their duty faithfully in taking the coach to the fort?

There was no need for Buffalo Bill to remain longer in ambush, he knew well.

The harm had been done before the coach reached the gap, as once before had been the case.

So Buffalo Bill left his hiding-place and ran down into the trail.

He called to the horses and they halted.

They seemed to be glad to have the responsibility removed from them of carrying the coach to Fort Rest.

Having halted the team, Buffalo Bill walked to the coach and threw open the door, starting back at what he beheld there.

There sat Hawkshaw upon the back seat, his hands and feet manacled, and his form tied upright, for the bullet wound in the center of his forehead showed that he was dead.

Upon his heart, fastened there with black pins, was a placard upon which were a skull and cross-bones in black, a red dagger, and words in crimson:

"Let another man dare drive this trail, and this shall be his fate!"

CHAPTER IX.

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET.

Buffalo Bill's face grew stern as death, as he read the placard on the dead stage driver's breast, and his eyes burned brightly, while from between his clinched teeth came the words:

"Another driver gone to his death; but I shall drive this trail in spite of all threats."

He placed his hand upon that of the dead driver, to discover that the flesh was still warm—proof that he could not have been long dead.

"I will drive back over the trail and find the spot," he muttered.

Then he mounted the box, wheeled the team about and started upon the back trail.

His eyes carefully searched the trail on either side for the spot where the coach had been held up.

But on and on he went and no such place was visible.

He continued along the trail, however, though convinced that he had surely passed the spot where the coach had been halted.

Then a desire seized him to go on to Fort Famine.

He reached the relay and found that Hawkshaw had passed there in safety.

"I am going on to Fort Famine, Murdock, and shall return over the trail by night, so have the coach ready for me," he said to the stock-tender out at Relay Number Four.

"What! you going ter drive ther coach, Buffalo Bill?" asked Murdock.

"Well, I am, for this run, at least, and then I shall put a man on who will go through I think."

"Who is he?"

"Well, that is a secret, but if those mysterious murderers get away with the man, they will have something to do."

"Well, it's gittin' time they was worsted, Bill."

"Yes, and their time is coming."

The two assistants having hitched up the fresh team, Buffalo Bill mounted the box and drove away on the trail to Fort Famine.

He put his team through rapidly, and it was an hour before sunset when the sentinel at Fort Famine reported the coach returning.

This created great excitement, for it was surmised that Hawkshaw had been unable to get through, and had turned about, being pursued, for his horses appeared to have been pushed hard.

Then a great shout arose as Buffalo Bill was recognized as the man on the box.

He swept into the fort, ordered the stablemen to devote themselves to the horses, and have them ready to return in just two hours.

Then a guard was placed over the coach in which was the body of poor Hawkshaw, and Buffalo Bill went to headquarters to report to Major Dean.

Care and sorrow had left their impress upon the face of the handsome major, but he received the scout pleasantly, and listened with deepest interest to what he had to say.

"I came back, major, hoping to find the spot where those murderers held up the coach, so I could take their trail from there, leaving the coach at the nearest relay station.

"But I could find no trace of the scene of the hold-up, so came on to report to you.

"I shall take the coach back myself to-night, and —"

"And meet the same fate of the others."

"I think not, sir, but I wish to find out by my return to-night if these murderers are constantly camping on the trail or not."

"How can you?"

"If they hold me up, then they are camping upon the trail, sir."

"And if not?"

"It will show that they have a retreat which they go to after the coach has passed and repassed."

"And if they hold up the coach they will kill you."

"I am not so sure of that, sir; but I must take the chances, and will, but I have certain ideas of my own, which I wish to put to the test."

"Well, Cody, I must let you have your way, and somehow I feel that you bear a charmed life."

"You have promised to rescue my daughter, or discover her fate, and I have confidence in you."

"I thank you, Major Dean, and I hope to keep my pledge to you before very long."

It had become known that Buffalo Bill intended to take the coach back to Fort Rest.

And more, he was to drive the fatal trail by night.

As though defying death, he was to carry back in the coach the dead body of poor Hawkshaw.

This looked like tempting Providence to do its worst.

So a large crowd had gathered to see the scout depart as driver of the fatal coach, for it was the same coach upon which so many had been killed.

He had had a good supper, Major Dean had given him a handful of fragrant Havanas, and lighting one, he mounted his box in apparent good humor with himself and the world in general.

He sent the team away at a dashing pace, and soon the rumble of wheels died away in the distance, while many a head in the fort was ominously shaken, and bets were quietly made among the gamblers that Buffalo Bill was taking his last ride, that he had dared fate too far. But the scout held on at a greater speed than that at which the team had before been sent over the trail.

The coach was empty, and there was no baggage.

The wheels had been well greased, and if the horses arrived at the relay station distressed they would have ample time to rest before next coach day.

The relay was reached well ahead of the usual time for the run from the fort, and Murdock had the fresh team all ready.

Buffalo Bill had little to say, but Murdock started as a flash of his lantern showed that the body of Hawkshaw was still inside the coach.

"You will have a new man ter drive her through next time, yer say, Buffalo Bill?" called out Murdock, as the scout mounted to the box.

"Yes, I will."

With this the whip snapped over the backs of the horses, and they were away.

The coach lamps were lighted, and cast grim, dancing

shadows as it rolled along, giving a weird aspect to the flying vehicle.

But Buffalo Bill was a skilled, daring and powerful driver, and he knew the trail well.

The horses felt that they had a master hand upon the reins, and they went accordingly.

The coach came in sight of the gap at midnight, just the hour when graveyards yawn and spooks prow about, it is said.

Evidently to the surprise of the horses, they were drawn down to a walk to pass through the canyon.

The coach was halted at the lone camp of Buffalo Bill, and, dismounting, he got his traps which he had left there.

Then he mounted the box again, and drove on at a funereal pace, until he had passed through the fatal gap.

Once more then the horses were sent forward with a rush, until again halted at the creek, when Buffalo Bill dismounted, and hitching the team, went off at a run for his horse.

The animal was found as he had left it, except that there was a string about his neck, and a card attached.

Reaching the coach by aid of one of the lights, Buffalo Bill saw on the card as follows:

"Don't dare us too far, Buffalo Bill!"

He said nothing, hitched his horse by the side of the off leader, and, again mounting the box, went on at the same rapid pace to the next relay.

Here he halted for fresh horses, and the men seemed startled at seeing the scout driving, and the dead body of Hawkshaw in the coach.

"We feared he'd get it, Bill, and I tell you we are getting skeered the way this killin' goes on," said one of the men at the relay.

Buffalo Bill replied:

"Don't mind it, pards, for it will stop soon, for I put a new man on as driver, and he'll go through, never fear."

"Who is he, Bill?"

"Nobody knows."

"He is an unknown, and he was not born to be killed by cowardly murderers in ambush."

"But I must be off."

Away he went again, and in spite of his halt in the gap, and again for his horse, he was then over an hour ahead of schedule time between Fort Famine and the relay station.

On went the team, urged to a fast trot, and just as dawn broke, Fort Rest came into view three miles away.

The sentinel on the watch tower reported the coming of the coach, and a cheer rose for Hawkshaw, though he should have come in at sunset, the day before.

As the coach drew nearer a troop of cavalry was halted

the stockade gates, for they were under orders to go out and see what had become of the coach.

Buffalo Bill was recognized on the box when still quite a distance off, and Captain May, in command of the troop, at once spurred toward headquarters to acquaint Colonel Miles with the fact.

"That settles the fate of poor Hawkshaw, if Cody is bringing the coach in."

"Order him to report at once to me, Captain May," said the colonel.

The soldiers about the stockade gate caught a hasty glimpse of the form of Hawkshaw as the coach rolled in, and at once their cheers ceased, for they knew that he was either wounded or dead.

"Ask Colonel Miles to kindly come to the stage station, please," called out Buffalo Bill, as he passed through the gate.

The colonel was there soon after the coach halted and Buffalo Bill said:

"I wish you to see the situation as it is, colonel.

"Harry passed through the canyon on the outward run without molestation.

"At noon the next day the coach came in, the horses trotting leisurely along, the reins fast to the lamps, and the body of Harry inside, as you see it now.

"That placard I left upon him, and his hands and feet were manacled, while he is tied in an upright position.

"I at once drove back to find the place of the hold-up.

"But I was unable to do so, and went on to Fort Hamine.

"I then started back by night over the trail, got my traps left in the canyon and met with no molestation.

"I halted to secure my horse, and I found him with a strap string and card about his neck, showing that he had been visited, and my presence known in the gap.

"I now desire, sir, to drive the coach on to Trail End City, and I will find a man who will take the coach through and return, on the run between the forts, and I believe in safety.

"At least, sir, I ask permission to make the trial."

"You have done well, Buffalo Bill, and you shall have the permission you ask.

"If another driver is killed, however, I shall stop the running of the coaches. Now about this poor fellow?"

"I would request, sir, that his body be sent in an ambulance to be buried alongside the other drivers who have fallen there, for such was his wish."

"It shall be granted.

"And you?"

"After breakfast, sir, I will start upon the run to Trail End City."

"But you need rest."

"I had more rest than I needed, sir, the forty-eight hours I was in the gap, thank you, colonel."

When it became known that Buffalo Bill had made the run, by night too, and with the dead driver in the coach, and was going to drive the coach on to Trail End City, there were a number anxious to go eastward with him, who had before feared to take the trip.

So, when the coach started out with Buffalo Bill on the box, he had two companions by his side, and no less than nine passengers inside the stage, one of whom was an officer's wife, another the wife of the sutler.

The scout driver sent his horses briskly along, the relay stations were reached ahead of time, and the sun was two hours high when the coach began the descent of the mountain trail leading to Trail End City in the valley. Every eye in the city was on the watch for the coach.

All felt the deepest interest in knowing the fate of Hawkshaw.

The man who had killed the one who had called him a coward, before his leaving, was not surely inclined to back down when he came to the gap.

There were many who said that he would never go through, others who added that he would never get through alive, while still more declared that he was just the man to take the chances and win life against death in the deadly game of running the gauntlet.

So a great roar went up, surging from Peter's Hotel to the cabins on the hillside, the mines, and from everywhere that men were gathered in their various occupations or in idling.

Then a general rush was made to meet the coach.

It was coming sure enough.

And more; there were two passengers on the box with the driver.

"Was that driver Hawkshaw?" was the question which everybody asked everybody else.

At last the coach crossed the valley stream, and came pulling up the hill.

Then all eyes were strained, and a voice rang out:

"It is Buffalo Bill on the box and not Hawkshaw."

CHAPTER X.

ALONE OVER THE FATAL TRAIL.

A few moments more and Buffalo Bill's foot went down upon the brake, and the stage had halted.

"I came in behind time, boss, but it was unavoidable," he said, as he threw the reins upon the backs of the wheel-horses.

"Where is Hawkshaw?" asked Peters, almost in a whisper.

"In his grave by this time, Peters."

"Killed?"

"Yes."

"In Graveyard Gap?"

"In that vicinity."

"How?"

"No one knows, but I found him dead, and in manacles in his coach, and his team trotting on to the fort."

"When?"

"Yesterday at noon."

"He went through all right on the run out?"

"Yes."

"But was killed coming back?"

"Yes."

"Any robbery?"

"Only Harry was robbed, for no passengers would travel, and the miners won't send any treasure along now."

"It has come to that, then?"

"Yes."

"Then that means that the stages to the forts must be taken off."

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"Because you must try still further to push them through."

"No one will drive."

"Try them."

"I suppose I must do so, but it will do no good."

"Give them a chance to refuse."

This conversation had taken place before the crowd, while the passengers were getting supper, preparatory to taking the coach going east, or in the direction they wished to go.

Buffalo Bill called Peters into his private room and the latter said:

"See here, Bill, I have new orders from the company."

"Yes."

"They say offer as high as three hundred for the run, and if any accept and are killed, then I am to get up a band of seven men to go as an escort for the coach, changing their horses going and coming at Fort Rest."

"Well, make the offer and see who accepts."

"And I hope there will be some one who will do so, for if the company starts in on this escort business it will have to do it on all the trails, and it will take an army to guard the coaches."

"You are right, so try the offer first."

"And if they do refuse?"

"Then, as I told you once before, Peters, I have a man who will go."

"He must be a dandy if he does."

"He is willing to take all chances."

"Is he a driver?"

"You mean one of the Overland?"

"Yes."

"He is not, but he can drive as well as any of you men, and knows the trail the darkest night."

"Then why not let him go now?"

"Because you must give your men the chance first."

"Not a man will go, I know."

"Try them."

"Then it will be for your man to get the three hundred a run."

"You are mistaken, for my man will accept no pay."

"What does that mean, Bill?"

"That he is not driving for money."

"What then?"

"Under orders."

"Well, whatever his motive, let it go, so long as he will drive."

"Now I must see what I can do among the drivers."

The coaches east, north and south having departed, Peters went to the saloon where he knew he would find nine-tenths of the community.

He was accompanied by Buffalo Bill, and when they entered a general hush fell upon the crowd.

"Pards," called out Peters, the Overland boss, "have word from the company to get drivers for the Great Trail."

"I wish to tell you that the coaches must go through."

"The offer is three hundred dollars for the run, and it's a big amount of money to make in fifty hours' time."

"Now, who bids for the prize—who takes the purse?"

"Don't all speak at once."

But no one spoke; there was a dead silence, for there were no takers.

For some reason Peters seemed glad that there were no takers of his offer.

He urged for a while, but in a faint way, and at last when not a soul had spoken, he turned to Buffalo Bill and said:

"You see how it is, Bill?"

"Yes."

"Not a man will go."

"I can hardly blame them, Peters."

"Well, you said that if I found no one to take the offer, you would find me a man who would do so."

"Yes."

"And you will?"

"I will."

"Who is he?"

"That I cannot tell you."

"Where is he?"

"He will be at Fort Rest, for you must send your coach through there."

"And then?"

"He will take the coach to Fort Famine and back."

"If he don't get killed."

"If he does, I will have another man to put in his place."

"That's fair, certainly! But should number two go under?"

"Number three will be ready to take his place, and so with number three, four, and as many as are needed, for the Overland coaches shall go through, I am resolved on that," was Buffalo Bill's determined way of putting it.

This conversation was overheard by many, and it seemed to increase the interest felt in the running of the gauntlet of death.

A driver was readily found who consented to drive the coach to Fort Rest, await its return there from Fort Famine, and bring it back to Trail End City, for very seldom had a hold-up ever been known to occur upon the first half of the run.

That night Buffalo Bill remained at the hotel and was well entertained by Peters, who was the "great man" of Trail End City.

He had brought his saddle and bridle over on the coach, and readily got a horse from Peters to ride back to Fort Rest.

After a hearty breakfast, and followed by a cheer from those who saw him depart, Buffalo Bill mounted his horse and rode off on the trail.

He seemed in no hurry, and it was night before he arrived at Fort Rest, he having made quite long halts at the relay stations.

Hawkshaw had been laid in his grave, by the side of his slain companions, and having seen Colonel Miles for half an hour, Buffalo Bill sought Dr. Brand at his quarters.

"I came to ask, sir, if there is any hope whatever for Bill's recovery?"

"I fear not the slightest, Cody."

"He is still unconscious, then?"

"Wholly so, and steadily sinking."

"With a chance of regaining consciousness, sir?"

"I see none, I am sorry to say."

"I have watched him closely, and been ready to ask the questions you wished me to ask, should his reason turn."

"How long do you think he will last, sir?"

"I give him a couple of days only."

Buffalo Bill turned sorrowfully away and went to his quarters.

He retired early, but before dawn was up and in his saddle.

His way lay along the death trail toward Fort Famine.

He went at a rapid pace until he reached the creek, and then went very slowly.

He eyed one side of the trail only, and with a fixed look that took in everything that came before his vision.

Reaching the hard soil of the canyon, he kept his eyes upon the high cliffs upon either side, rising like walls far above his head.

Every crevice was examined upon one side, as before.

Entering the open space, every boulder and bush on one side was gone over with the same minute scrutiny.

Then he passed on his way, still, as before, searching the trail, and all upon his right hand.

He had halted at the relay for a while, the one nearest Fort Rest, and had quite a long talk with the three men there, having dinner with them.

He halted again at Relay Number Four, and as it was late in the afternoon, consented to remain for supper.

Murdock had just come in from a hunt, and had killed plenty of game, so they had a feast of venison steaks, a wild goose, some potatoes roasted, bread and coffee.

"Well, Bill, you hain't gi'n up yit trying to find the mysterious murderers," said Murdock, as Buffalo Bill started upon his way just at nightfall.

"No, Murdock, not yet," was the reply, and the scout rode on his way.

To the surprise of Murdock and his two comrades, Buffalo Bill arrived at their cabin, on his return, just at dinner-time.

He was made welcome, however, and told them he had been sent back to Fort Rest with dispatches to Major Dean.

After dinner he started on the trail, and this time it was the other side of the trail that underwent his closest scrutiny, as the opposite side had been scrutinized.

He rode slowly, as before, and went at the same pace through the gap.

On the side he was searching there was the newly-made grave of Hawkshaw.

By his side also lay the other murdered drivers in a long row.

Beyond were the graves of the passengers who had fallen victims to the mysterious assassins.

"There, indeed, lie three heroes—Hawkshaw, the bravest of them all, for he was the last one."

"Peace to their ashes!"

"They are at rest now. If they missed the joys that would have come to them in living, by dying they have also missed as many sorrows and sufferings which surely would have been theirs."

"Again I say, may they rest in peace; and more—may they be avenged."

The scout had stood hat in hand by the graves, his head bowed in deepest respect as he mused aloud.

Now he turned and walked on, his horse slowly following him.

Halting and looking back at the group of graves in the canyon, Buffalo Bill raised his hand and cried aloud:

"Yes, may you be avenged, my gallant pards, shall be my daily and nightly prayer."

The scout's voice rang, his eyes flashed fire as he uttered the words.

Then he threw himself into his saddle, his face assumed its usual expression once more, and he rode slowly on as before, searching one side of the trail.

He went to his old camp and looked about for a trail.

He wished to find some trace of the one who had been to that camp and hung the placard of warning around the neck of his horse.

But trail there was none.

So on he went, and just before sunset rode up to Relay Station Number Three.

There were three men here, one of them a man by the name of Fox being the overseer of the relay stations between Trail End City and Fort Famine, it being his duty to make the ride once a week to see how the stock was cared for and that the men did their duty.

He had been a driver in the Rocky Mountains, but had lost an arm while on his box, and was given the place as overseer of stations.

A tall, handsome man he was, of powerful physique, and a manner as gentle as a woman's.

He carried two revolvers in his belt, both upon his left hip, so as to reach them with his one hand, and also a knife, and he was a dead shot, and it was said a dangerous man to arouse in spite of his gentle ways.

It was said that he was a man of education, though if so, he assumed the border dialect in conversation.

His comrades dubbed him "Captain," though at times he was called "Foxey."

The Station Number Three was situated in the mouth of a canyon which widened into a valley, where there was fine grazing and water for the horses.

There cliffs of the canyon towered high over the cabin of the stock-tenders, and the corral, there being a score of horses in the latter.

"Ho, Foxey, haven't been to supper, have you, for I'm hungry as a bear," called out Buffalo Bill, as he drew near the canyon.

"Just getting ready, Bill, and you are more than welcome.

"Any news back on the trail?"

"Nothing, for the major has heard not a word about his daughter, and has about given up all hope of ever seeing her alive again."

"I hope it won't be as bad as that, Bill."

"It looks so, Foxey, I am sorry to say," was Cod answer.

After enjoying his supper and a pipe, he mounted his horse and rode off on the Fort Rest trail.

CHAPTER XI.

THE UNKNOWN.

Buffalo Bill rode on toward Fort Rest for a couple miles, when he halted in the shadow of a huge rock which hung over the trail like the prow of a mighty vessel.

He gave a low whistle in the short calls, and at once over the brow of the rock swung a human form, which descended a rope apparently.

Instead, it was a rope ladder, for the end of it dropped in his trail by the side of the scout's horse.

"I dare not halt now, for I may be followed.

"Here is a note I wrote you this afternoon, and in the dark I scribbled something further as I rode along, which you may be able to make out.

"The coach will come through to Fort Rest on the trail and then it will be for me to act.

"Now I must be off, pard."

There was a silent grasp of the hand, a few muttered words from the man clinging upon his rope ladder, and Buffalo Bill rode on his way.

Then the man ascended the ladder once more and disappeared it up after him.

He had hardly done so when a form skulked along the trail following Buffalo Bill.

The man on the cliff peered over, and watching, the form returning soon after, but he made no effort to halt him, but let him go on his way.

It was midnight when the scout reached the fort, seeing a light burning in the cabin where the wounded man Hill was, he made his way there, after putting his horse.

Two scouts were there, and upon a cot lay a form covered with a sheet!

Instantly Buffalo Bill removed his hat, for he needed be told that the scout had passed the portal of eternal rest.

"He died this evening, just at sunset, Bill," said one of the scouts in a low tone.

"Poor fellow.

"Did he regain consciousness, Bony?"

"Yes, and asked to be placed in the door so that he could see the sun set."

"Anything else?"

"I do not know, for Dr. Brand was with him."

Buffalo Bill let his hand rest gently upon the head

the dead scout for a moment, as Bony drew back the sheet, and then went away.

He saw a light in the quarters of Surgeon Brand, so went to his room and knocked.

"Come in!"

The surgeon was there, playing cards with three other officers, and with a bowl of punch and a box of cigars upon the table before them.

"Ho, Cody, come in!" said the doctor, pleasantly, for he was too accustomed to scenes of misery and death not to have already forgotten the scout's death a few hours before.

"Pardon me, doctor, but I did not know you were engaged, and seeing a light in your quarters, dropped in."

"You did right. Sit down and have a glass of punch and tell me how I can serve you. You look tired."

"Yes, really ill," said one of the officers.

"Not sick, are you, Bill?" a second one remarked.

"A punch will make you feel better than any medicine Brand can give you, Cody," a third officer remarked.

"Yes, Bill, take a treble allowance and catch up with us," added the surgeon.

"Thank you, doctor, one will do, and I believe I really need that as a bracer, for I just came from the cabin where poor Hill lies."

"Yes, poor fellow, I could not save him, try as I might."

"He rallied at the last, asked to be taken to the door to see the sunset, and I gave him a stimulant."

"Then I sat down for a talk with him, for I saw that the change was but the rally before death."

"But when I spoke to him he did not answer, and when I touched his pulse I saw that he was dead."

"His life had gone out just as the sun disappeared behind the horizon."

"Then he said nothing more, sir?"

"Not a word."

Buffalo Bill sighed and turned away, soon after going to the quarters of Colonel Miles, to whom he said:

"Colonel, I have a favor to ask of you?"

"Granted."

"Well, sir, I may seem wrong in acting in a mysterious way, and not now explaining, but I shall make all clear in good time, sir."

"All right, I trust you, so go ahead."

"The coach has just come in, sir."

"So it was reported."

"You hold it to-night, sir, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And send it through by daylight to-morrow?"

"Yes, but I dread the result."

"Not so much as before, sir."

"Why not?"

"I have a man to take the coach through, sir, and he will be on hand in the morning when wanted."

"Poor fellow!"

"Not yet, sir; but the favor I wish to ask of you is that he must remain unknown."

"Who is he?"

"That is the secret, sir, I must keep from every one, and so I ask you that he may wear a mask, and more, colonel, please give me a pass to allow my unknown to go and come at will from and to the fort."

The request of the chief of scouts fairly astounded the colonel, to judge from his looks.

"You wish to send a masked driver out upon the coach, and to have me give him a pass that allows him to enter and leave the fort at will."

"Yes, sir."

"This is a remarkable request."

"I admit it, sir, and I wish that I could now explain my reasons, but I cannot. The coach is driven here to the fort by a driver who will not take it further, sir."

"I cannot blame him."

"But I have a man who will take his place here and drive on to Fort Famine. But there are reasons why he should not be known yet a while, Colonel Miles, and the air of mystery may help our cause. At least, I think so, sir."

"He is to go in disguise there, and so remain until he is killed by those murderers, or return to the fort?"

"Yes, sir."

"When is he to unmask, unless he is killed?"

"When there is no longer any mystery regarding these murderers."

The colonel turned toward his desk, took up a pen and wrote the pass.

"Do you have hopes, Cody, of seeing your masked driver alive after he leaves the fort?" asked the colonel.

"Yes, sir, I have; but I have another favor to ask, colonel."

"What, another?"

"Yes, sir; I would like a leave of absence, sir, for a month."

"What! Buffalo Bill ask for a leave of absence in the face of the enemy?"

"It is not to go far, sir, only to be at liberty to go and come at will, for I do not wish to be hampered by duties in the fort just now."

"It shall be as you wish, Cody, for I am sure you are aiming at a dead center in what you are doing now."

"I am trying to do my duty, sir."

"When do you wish your leave to begin?"

"To-night, sir."

"For one month?"

"Yes, sir."

The colonel turned again to his desk and wrote a special leave of absence for the scout, who took it with an expression of thanks.

"Now you do not wish an escort to go with our new man, Cody?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Suppose he is killed?"

"He must take his chances as the others have done, sir."

Buffalo Bill found that the driver who had brought the coach up, was Brighton, a man well-known along the Overland stage runs as a brave fellow.

"Well, Bill, I'm here, and come through without a mishap, I'm glad to say," said the driver. "Who's to take the coach on ter Famine?"

"I have a man who will be here on time in the morning."

"What did yer say his name were?"

"I didn't say."

"But yer knows?"

"He is an unknown."

"Ah! And maybe he won't do it."

"Well, pard, you will be here at the fort to see whether he does or not, and you will take the coach back to Trail End City when he brings it here from Fort Famine."

"If he does."

"I admit that the chances are against him, but then he is going to try."

"He kin do no more than that, Pard Bill," said Brighton.

The horn was blown half an hour before starting time, and a large crowd of soldiers, scouts and hangers-on were gathering there, impelled by curiosity to see who the daring driver was that would thus go to certain death, as all believed.

Officers were there, and their wives and children, and to the surprise of many, Colonel Miles came sauntering down to the scene, accompanied by Captain May and several of his staff.

The colonel also felt a desire to have a look at this bold driver who was unknown to him, and who, he well knew, would be masked, through some strange whim of Buffalo Bill's.

"Here he comes!"

Then, coming from the direction of the scout's quarters, was seen a tall form making for the stage station.

Every eye was upon him; and, as he came leisurely along he cracked a very handsome coach whip which he carried in a manner that showed how well he knew how to handle one.

He was dressed in a suit of black corduroy, top boots, a sombrero, wore gauntlet gloves, and had a silk hand-

kerchief about his neck, while, strangest of all, his face was completely hidden under a sable mask.

This was a surprise to the crowd, and a murmur among them as to what it meant.

As he came up to the station a silence fell upon him. He politely saluted the colonel, who, returning the salute, eyed the masked face curiously and intently.

"You are the stage boss, sir, I believe?" he said in a low voice.

"I am."

"I was told by Chief Cody to report to you to take the coach out on the run to Fort Famine."

"It is just five minutes to starting time," and he took out a handsome gold watch and glanced at the dial.

"Yes, Buffalo Bill told me he would have a man here on time to take the coach out. You are the man?"

"I am, sir."

"What is your name?"

"My name has nothing to do with my driving, sir, put me down as Unknown."

"All right! And you know what you have to face?"

"I have been told all, sir, by Mr. Cody."

"There is not one chance in ten that you get through alive."

"I thought the odds were much greater against me," was the cool reply.

"You had better leave your watch and valuables here."

"No, for they will be of no use to me if I lose my life. I risk death and robbery together on this venture."

"You are a cool one and no mistake; but where is Cody?"

"He was granted a leave of absence, I believe."

"Well, pard, you is ther durndest fool I ever steered. I ter drive ther trail, so I says good-by ter yer," said Brighton, the driver, who had listened to all that passed, stepped forward and confronted the masked driver.

The unknown took the extended hand, and turning to the stage boss, said:

"Any orders?"

"Not any, except not to get killed."

"Time is up, then, so I'll be off."

He turned, leaped lightly up to the box, gathered up his reins, and said, pleasantly:

"Let them go, boys!"

The stablemen sprang back from the heads of the horses, and with a crack of the whip the driver started his team on the run through Graveyard Gap!

Then, loud and long rang out a cheer for the man, while Colonel Miles, as he walked back toward his quarters, sent an orderly to summon Buffalo Bill to come to him at once.

The orderly returned to headquarters, from going to the scout's quarters, to report that Buffalo Bill had gone away before dawn, it was said.

"Go and find out at what time Buffalo Bill passed out of the main stockade gate, and if he was alone?"

In a short time he returned, with the information that Buffalo Bill had passed out of the main stockade gate half an hour before dawn, riding one horse and leading another, the latter carrying a pack.

Colonel Miles turned to Captain May and said:

"I told you the favor Buffalo Bill asked of me, captain?"

"Yes, sir, to allow his driver to go masked."

"That was it, and for a leave of absence for himself."

"Now I gave him the key to what is known as my gate in the stockade wall, and I verily believe he rode out of the fort, and had some comrade awaiting him outside, and coming back through the little gate, went to his quarters and rigged up as the masked driver."

"Why so, may I ask, colonel?"

"Well, the unknown came from Cody's cabin."

"True, sir."

"He was about Cody's height and build."

"Very nearly, sir, I should think."

"And he wore gauntlet gloves, was masked, had even his neck concealed with that silk handkerchief he wore, and it looked very much to me as though he had his long hair done up under his sombrero."

"It might be so, colonel; but then what motive would Cody have for going in a masquerading costume?"

"He well knew that I would not allow him to drive that coach."

"That is so, sir."

"He was determined to go through on the coach, and he is not one to stop at any danger to gain his ends, and I really believe that he masqueraded just to carry his point, and discover how it is all those people have been massacred, believing that he could escape."

"Then I fear, sir, that he has made a sad mistake," said Captain May.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEATH GAUNTLET.

On drove the masked driver along the trail, and entering the gap, he drew his horses down to a walk, placed his repeating rifle across his knees and loosened his revolvers in their holsters.

He passed the graves, the scene of the hold-ups, and no shot came, no one appeared to molest him.

Once through the gap, he passed on to the next relay station, blowing the stage horn as before, long ere he came in sight of the cabin, which showed a knowledge of where it was situated, at least.

When the coach drove up before Relay Number Four, Murdock and his men were there to greet the driver, and started when they beheld the masked face of the one who had dared Graveyard Gap.

It was an hour before sunset when the sentinel on the watch tower of Fort Famine reported the stage coming in. Who was the driver that dared make the run was the question upon every lip.

On came the coach at a rapid pace, and all the fort had gathered to receive it.

As the stockade walls were reached, such a cheer as greeted the driver was never heard before in Fort Famine.

He had run the death gauntlet in safety.

The driver had come through alone, and was masked.

He threw the reins down upon the backs of the wheelers, dismounted and made his way toward the quarters of Major Dean.

That officer had seen the coach come in, and had been told by his orderly that the driver was masked.

Tall, erect, with a soldierly step and fine bearing, the masked driver walked to headquarters.

As the orderly ushered him across the threshold he came face to face with Major Dean, who wore a look of settled sadness.

"Pardon me, Major Dean, if I do not unmask or uncover my head in your presence, but Colonel Miles gave me permission to drive masked, for, under such conditions only do I make the run."

"You are excusable, sir; but I suppose Colonel Miles knows who you are?"

"He does not, sir."

"Then you are unknown wholly?"

"Except to Buffalo Bill."

"Then that is all-sufficient, sir."

"I am glad to meet you, driver, and to congratulate you upon having come through, this way at least, in safety, yet the back run remains."

"I feel that I shall go through in safety, sir."

"Heaven grant it; but, if not presuming, may I ask why you go masked?"

"I cannot answer your question now, sir."

"Should I be killed it will be made known, and when the work is accomplished that urges me to my present course, you will know all, Major Dean."

"And the work you expect to accomplish, may I ask?"

"To you, sir, in confidence, I will say that it is the rescue of your daughter, the sergeant's murderers, and their complete punishment for their evil deeds."

"Ha! Do you know that my child is not dead?" eagerly asked the major.

"I feel certain, sir, that she is alive and well," was

the reassuring response, which brought from Major Dean a most fervent:

"Thank God!"

The masked driver had been invited to half-a-dozen messes, but declined all invitations, and admiring the pluck of the man in taking the reins after the fatalities he knew of to all drivers, the bachelor club of officers sent him in a splendid supper and a bottle of wine with their compliments.

It was early when the light went out in the driver's lone cabin, and yet others remained up until late discussing him.

An early breakfast was furnished the masked driver from the table of the bachelor's mess, and after eating it he made his way to headquarters to report to Major Dean.

That officer received him warmly and said:

"Well, my friend, you see that the whole fort is up to see you off on your perilous drive, and many a prayer will be sent after you for your safety."

As the coach moved off a great shout arose, and when it passed through the outer gate the soldiers gave him a grand send-off.

The driver bowed his acknowledgment of the cheers upon either side of him, settled himself well in his seat, and sent his team ahead for the run back to Fort Rest or—the grave.

The masked driver drove back at an ordinary pace, as though not anxious to push his horses too hard, and arrived in sight of the first relay corral on the usual time.

He reached the open space, where the graves were, with his revolvers ready and his rifle across his knees, and cocked.

He even halted at the place of hold-up, and looked searchingly about him.

But not a sound was heard, not a leaf moved, and all was as quiet as those in the graves near by.

So on he went once more, yet still keeping on his guard, and drove up to Station Number Three slightly ahead of time.

Foxy and his men gave a wild cheer when they saw him coming, and the former cried, triumphantly:

"Pard, yer has done it!"

"I have not yet reached the end of my trail, Foxy, for there are many miles to travel yet; but I'll be ready for whoever holds me up."

"Yer hain't got no passengers, has yer?"

"Not one."

"What makes yer keep ther old hearse closed up so tight?"

"Why leave it open when there is nobody aboard?"

"Maybe you has a treasure inside thet don't need air?"

"Maybe I have, pard, and I only wish some curious road agent would make a search for it."

"I guess they'd be surprised, eh?"

"They might, if they lived long enough to know what the surprise was."

There was a plain, broken here and there by ridges and timber, to cross before reaching the fort, but the driver saw that the coach had been discovered at the fort and that its coming was creating a sensation.

As it drew near, the stockade walls were lined with soldiers, flags were run up on the staffs before the officers' cabins, and the guard was drawn up to receive the daring man who had been recognized as the masked driver.

The officer of the day had ascended to the water tower, and leveling his glass had called out to the sergeant of the guard:

"Sergeant, report at once to Colonel Miles that the man on the box is the masked driver."

A yell of delight broke forth at this news, and descending from the tower, the officer of the day arranged a reception for the brave fellow.

Dismounting from his box the masked driver found it hard to avoid the crowd about him, so said:

"I have to report, sir, that I made the run in safety, not having been molested in the slightest degree, so that the mails are intact."

"But now I must report to Colonel Miles, for whom I have dispatches."

Way was made for him through the crowd, and he walked with erect manner and dignified mien on to headquarters, bowing at the reception everywhere given him.

The colonel met him in a very cordial manner and said:

"Well, my masked unknown, it seems that the mysterious murderers did not take you for their game?"

"At least, not this time, sir, for I saw no one to molest me."

"This is remarkable; but will you try it again?"

"Oh, yes, sir, for I am on to stay until the mysterious murderers go under, or I do."

"I congratulate you upon being a man of very remarkable nerve, sir. You have dispatches for me, have you?"

The masked driver handed them over and, saluting, turned to leave, when the colonel said:

"Do you know that I have a suspicion that I know you, my mysterious unknown?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I do."

"Who do you think I am?"

"Why, no more nor less than William F. Cody, Buffalo Bill."

A light laugh came from beneath the thick black mask, and then followed the rejoinder:

"I will report, sir, in time to take the coach out again, for Driver Brighton takes it on the run to Trail End City and back to the fort."

"So I understand; but you will remain in the fort, of course?"

"Your pass, sir, gives me the right to go and come at will, so I shall avail myself of it, having your kind permission."

"All right, the pass will protect you," answered the colonel, and as the masked driver left the room he mused to himself:

"Now, is that man Buffalo Bill, or is he not?"

"I thought so, and I do not think so—in fact, I do not know."

"Well, I must bide my time to see this riddle solved." Straight to the quarters of Buffalo Bill went the masked driver, in the gathering gloom, for night was coming on.

Still unknown, the stage driver of Graveyard Gap, reported when next the coach arrived on the way to Fort Famine.

Again he went off with a rousing cheer, and anxiously his return was awaited.

But on time the coach came back and the unknown was on the box.

So continued the drives of the unknown, and it began to be believed that he either bore a charmed life, or his boldness had driven the outlaws from the trail.

One day the coach left Fort Rest after the unknown had held a long conversation with Colonel Miles.

Soon after the coach departed, a score of cavalymen, under Captain May, followed it.

There seemed to be some cause of delay at the relay station before Graveyard Gap was reached, for the coach was there when Captain May and his men rode up.

There were four stock men there, and they seemed surprised at the coming of the troops; but the unknown said quickly:

"Those four are your men, captain."

There were revolvers drawn, a short, sharp fight, in which the unknown took part, and three of the stock-tenders lay dead, also a soldier; but one of the men—Foxey—was captured alive.

Then the coach drove on, and passed through Graveyard Gap, halting at the next station.

Here it rested until Captain May and his men came up, and again the stock-tenders—five of them—were in trouble, only one prisoner being taken, and without the loss of a soldier.

At the next relay, where three stock-tenders were, the deadly scene was repeated, not one man escaping.

Then back the driver turned his coach to Graveyard Gap, the stage horn sounding as he approached the fatal gap.

An answering call was made, and soon over a lofty cliff fell a rope ladder as once before, and a man descended, just as Captain May rode up.

"Captain May, this man is an outlaw, but one I knew years ago, and whom I befriended more than once; I also saved his life."

"In coming through Graveyard Gap once, I met him, and made him a prisoner, but he offered me a price for his life to which I agreed."

"He has kept his word, for we have wiped out or captured his pards in outlawry."

"As stock-tenders these men knew all the plans of the Overland coaches, and not being suspected, they murdered and robbed at will."

"By way of a cave they gained that cliff, and there is their retreat, and there they hold their prisoners, to get ransom through Major Dean, who is a very rich man, for his daughter, the sergeant's wife and a young officer, a paymaster, who, to escape detection, dressed as a private soldier."

"Thus their prisoners are now free—see, Lieutenant Harper is now aiding the sergeant's wife down the rope ladder, Miss Dean having already descended."

"They were set free by this man."

"Quick, Rollins, get your things together, mount and light out, and it will be sure death to you if you are ever seen on these trails again; but I believe that you will lead a different life."

"I will I promise you! Good-by!" and the man was quick to take advantage of his freedom to make his escape, just as Lieutenant Harper came up escorting Hilda Dean and Mrs. Gale.

A cheer greeted them, and entering the coach, they were driven on by the unknown, while Captain May remained to get Miss Dean's baggage, which had been taken upon the cliff, leave a squad in the outlaws' retreat, and then hasten on to Fort Rest with his prisoners.

Fort Famine went nearly wild with joy when the coach drove up to the station with the three rescued prisoners, and the unknown, still remaining masked, with a fresh team of horses, started on the back trail to Fort Rest.

A sergeant and his men were left at Graveyard Gap, but the captain had gone on with his prisoners, who arrived only a short while before the masked driver, and hence all knew the story.

"Unmask! unmask!" were the wild cries of all, while Colonel Miles said:

"Yes, show your true colors now, my noble friend."

The mask was removed.

Buffalo Bill was revealed.

As soon as he could do so, the scout said:

"I met mystery with mystery, and went as an unknown, for those men were all superstitious, and feared to kill one they did not know."

"They became alarmed and checked their criminal acts until they should feel safe again."

"But now the Overland trains, even to Graveyard Gap, will be safe."

And that meant after the execution of Foxey and his outlaw pards, which followed very soon.

To-day a railroad runs through Graveyard Gap, yet to but few who travel constantly through the gap is its strange and deadly story known.

THE END.

Next week's BUFFALO BILL STORIES (No. 19) will contain, "Buffalo Bill's Death Grapple; or, Shadowed by the Sure Shots."

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